

## Chapter 1

Hermione looked out of her bedside window, yawning slightly. She looked back on her first week at Hogwarts; it had been completely normal. She had started all of her classes very nicely, and she had even got top marks in Transfiguration for her essay on the transformations of inanimate objects to living. She lay down on her comfy four-poster bed in the Girls Dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. She sighed. Yes, her first week had been very normal.

No possessed Professors after a stone, no 3 headed dogs, and no trolls purposely let into the school. No giant snakes in the pipes of the school, no people being Petrified and no young girls getting kidnapped.

No murderers escaped from Azkaban - no rats actually murderers, no teachers actually werewolves. *Though Lupin had been a great teacher*, Hermione thought. *So in regards to him, then I have no problem.*

There had been no TriWizard Tournament, no Yule Balls to attend, and no drunken House Elves. *How was Winky doing these days anyway?* she wondered. *I'll have to check on her.*

There were no twisted Ministry teachers to ruin their lives. *That awful Umbridge woman*, Hermione practically screamed in rage at the name. *I hope she's having a horrible life right now.*

There had been no flying on the backs of invisible horses to save someone who didn't need saving and no sneaking into teachers' offices to contact people who didn't need to be contacted. *Poor Sirius.* Hermione sniffed.

Yes, very normal indeed. The most – and only – very normal first week at Hogwarts Hermione had ever had.

And she loved it. Hermione grinned and cuddled her feather down pillow, slipping off into a dreamless sleep.

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Hermione woke up late on Saturday and began studying for her classes, as usual. Harry and Ron played a few games of chess, which unsurprisingly, Ron won.

Saturday afternoon, Hermione went for a brief walk across the bright welcoming grounds while Ron and Harry headed to Quidditch practice. As she leisurely strolled through the warm sunshine, a sudden gold glint to her left caught her eye. She looked over and saw a small, round golden disc. *Is that a galleon?* she asked herself.

Hermione looked around to see if anyone else had seen it. When she was sure they hadn't, she hurried over to it and picked it up, turning it over in her fingers. It wasn't a Galleon, but quite similar to one. It had the weight and the shape of a galleon, but instead of the Gringott's Wizarding Bank logo engraved on it, it had the words 'Make a Wish' inscribed elegantly onto its surface. At first she thought of it was just a joke and she considered leaving it right where she found it. But she could actually feel the wish token radiate a magical heat from it. She knew, she could *feel* that it was real, and that it wasn't a joke.

*Where had the coin come from? Hermione questioned. Who dropped it? Should I use it? Should turn it in? Or give it to Professor Dumbledore?*

Immediately, as though her questioning had triggered a fuse in her mind, a dozen or more wishes raced through Hermione's head. The last one that went through her head seemed to be the most crucial one, the one that her heart yearned for the most. *Ron... I wish Ron and me...* She stopped abruptly, for the coin had cleared of the line 'Make a Wish' and was replaced by more of the fancy writing with:

*"Be careful what you wish for, it might come true. Think about it, make it worth while."*

On the other side of the coin, there was more writing. It was very tiny and hard to read, but readable nonetheless. It read:

*"To make a wish, hold coin in palm of hand or in pocket. Simply start a sentence with 'I wish...' and your wish will be granted!"*

*Take Extreme CAUTION: Most wishes are IRREVERSIBLE!"*

Hermione bit her lip. She ought to think this through first. Really think about it. She couldn't just go and make some careless wish. It had to be worthwhile, like the coin had said.

She slid the coin into her pocket and headed back to the Common Room.

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Later that evening, Hermione was curled up in her favorite chair reading a book (*"The Tales of Mergatroyd Ballminder: Heroine and Magical Extraordinaire"*) waiting for Harry and Ron. Finally, around 10 o'clock in the evening, they returned from an obviously long and dragged out Quidditch practice. Both Ron and Harry looked dirty, tired and on edge. Hermione didn't realize just how on edge.

"How was practice?" she asked in a would-be cheerful voice. Judging by the look on their faces, Hermione thought that it had gone pretty bad, but she wanted to be as nice as possible.

"Bad. Bloody rotten," Harry snapped at her.

"Horrible! Now get off it!" Ron snarled.

Hermione opened her mouth slightly at their reaction. "I was just asking..."

"Yea, well, why can't you ask us tomorrow or something?" Ron fairly yelled.

"And you don't have to be so happy, either!" Harry said loudly and angrily.

Hermione snapped her book shut and stood challengingly. "Since when was it a CRIME to ask you how practice went!"

"Since now!" Ron was now yelling. "I said it was horrible!"

"How many times do you have to ask!" Harry growled and glared at Hermione.

Hermione's mouth was wide open now. "What on EARTH happened! Why are you two being so rotten to me!"

"Nothing happened! It was a ruddy horrible practice! I didn't stop a single ball! I even fell off my broom!" Ron screamed.

"And I didn't catch the Snitch! We had to get Ginny – who is, by the way, a *Chaser*, not a *Seeker* – to get it! I ran into the goalpost!" Harry threw his Quidditch robes across the room.

"I was just asking because I care! How was I supposed to know you didn't do well today? You make it sound like it's all my fault!" Hermione ranted. "I hit a goalpost today... thanks a lot, Hermione." She mimicked sarcastically. "In case you didn't know, I had NOTHING to do with it! But you two always take your bloody frustration out on me! I'm just a bloody PACKHORSE for your problems!"

Harry looked a little taken aback by Hermione's shouting. His anger subsided, as did Ron's. Harry started to apologize. "Hermione, I'm –"

"Sorry! Ya, I know! You always are!" she cut him off and continued. "This isn't the first time this has happened, you know!" Her eyes filled up with tears. She was very glad no one else was in the Common Room, although she was pretty sure they were hearing every word exchanged anyway. "How many times a day do I help you? Am I nice to you? And then you come in here and rip my head off because YOU'VE had a rotten day!"

Ron's face had softened at the sight of Hermione's tears. He was already instantly guilty. "D-don't cry, Hermione... listen..." He reached out to put his hand on her shoulder, but she slapped it away forcefully.

"No, you listen! If your life goes wrong, then I'M the one who pays! You're my best friends and I'm happy to listen to and help you with your problems! But I don't want them thrown at me so hard that I get *hurt*!"

Ron looked ashamed and a little hurt. His ears began to turn red. Harry obviously felt the same way as Ron: ashamed and a bit hurt. "Look, Hermione –"

“I wish it were different! I wish EVERYTHING WAS DIFFERENT! I wish I had two best friends who cared about me and didn’t yell at me!” Hermione by now was practically sobbing and the tears were flowing freely down her face. She tore from the Common Room, leaving Ron and Harry in a guilty silence, and bolted up the steps to the girls’ dormitories.

She thought she heard someone call, “Hermione, wait...” But she didn’t stop.

She slammed the door shut as hard as she could, abruptly ending the whispering that had been going on when she’d blazed in. Hermione threw herself on her bed, ripped the hangings shut around her and sobbed and cried until there were tears left to cry or she had fallen asleep – she didn’t know which came first.

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In the middle of her sleep, Hermione woke up to feel cold swishing all around her. She cracked open an eye – was a window open? – but shut it immediately. Everywhere around her was washed in brilliant white light. The swishing continued. It felt like a great wind was whipping in every direction around Hermione’s bed.

Suddenly, it stopped. Hermione slowly opened her eyes. The light was gone. She peeked out from between her bed hangings to see if anyone else had been awakened by the strange phenomenon. Nothing stirred. There was no sound except the rhythmic breathing to indicate that everyone was asleep.

Hermione shook her head. *Must’ve been a weird dream*, she thought and dozed off back to sleep.

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Finally, Sunday morning came.

Hermione stood and stretched, glad that it was still the weekend. She always liked to sleep in late on the weekends.

As expected, she was the last girl to rise. All the other bed hangings were open, and there were no other girls up in the dormitory with her.

The thoughts of last night came rushing back to her – the fight. She hated being on bad terms with Ron and Harry. But she knew that as soon as she arrived in the Common Room this morning, Harry and Ron would apologize, as would she. Hermione only hoped that this time it would be different. It wouldn't happen again.

The thought of Ron's pained face flashed in her head. He'd looked so... hurt. She didn't mean to hurt him, just get her point through.

*Why'd you have to yell?* she thought. She wasn't sure whether she was referring to herself or Ron. Maybe both.

Hermione got dressed, combed her hair, brushed her teeth and hoped she looked a little extra nice. No reason, really, just wanted to.

She walked down the steps to the Common Room, rehearsing what she was going to say and steeling her face to look like she was still mad. Hermione turned the corner, ready to see Ron and Harry run towards her. Instead, Hermione nearly fainted at the sight before her.

Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle and Pansy Parkinson were sitting in Harry, Ron, and Hermione's favorite chairs in front of the fire in the Gryffindor Common Room!

"Good morning!" Pansy and Goyle chorused. There was another girl that Hermione didn't recognize, standing behind Crabbe. Malfoy stood to greet her, smiling.

"What... how... I... y-you... w-who... " Hermione stuttered uncontrollably. Malfoy – here – in the Gryffindor Common Room! She shook her head and regained her speech in a hurry. "What are you doing here?" she said as icily as she could.

Malfoy looked confused. "What do you mean?" This infuriated Hermione. He was going to play dumb about it?

"I said, 'what are you doing here!'" Hermione said again, clenching her fist tightly.

Malfoy glanced at the others. "Sitting here, waiting for you... like we always do?" he answered.

Hermione's blood boiled. What was he playing at? "Get out."

Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy stood. The girl cowered behind them, looking very worried.

"H-Hermione...?" Pansy looked genuinely concerned.

*Good performance*, Hermione thought. "How did you get in here?" she demanded loudly. Where were all the other Gryffindors!

Malfoy glanced at the others again. "I – we used the password, like... like everyone else..." he said unsurely. The others nodded quickly.

"I said, GET OUT!" Hermione suddenly yelled and pointed to the portrait hole. The five before her all jumped when she yelled.

Finally, one of them found a little courage. "What? We're not allowed to be in here?" Crabbe piped up weakly.

"Yea, that's right! We have the same right as you!" Pansy squeaked an agreement.

"You know the rules! Just the same as everyone else! I don't know how you got in here, but you *get out* of the Gryffindor Common Room NOW! You dirty horrible *Slytherins*!" Hermione practically screamed. *Please, someone help me here!* she thought.

Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, the girl and Pansy all took a step back looking horrified. "B-b-but Hermione! We are in Gryffindor!" Pansy cried out, tears brimming in her eyes.

*You should get an award for this performance, Parkinson*, Hermione thought dryly. She saw that they were indeed wearing Gryffindor robes, which only made her all the more furious. *They stole robes!*

"Why would you think we're Slytherins?" Goyle asked fearfully. The girl behind him nodded.

Malfoy took a few steps toward Hermione. "Mione? Are you ok? Do you want to go see Madame Pomfrey?" He held out his hand to hers.

“No! Don’t! GET – AWAY – FROM – ME!” Hermione bolted past the Slytherins, leaving them looking worried, scared, hurt, dumbstruck, confused, and even sick (Pansy).

She ran down the halls as hard and as fast as her legs would carry her. McGonagall... Dumbledore... Teacher... someone! Harry... Ron... where were all the people who would help her!

To her horror, she saw everyone who was in Slytherin wearing Gryffindor robes...all of the Hufflepuffs were Ravenclaws...all of the Ravenclaws were Hufflepuffs...

And then it hit her.

All of the Gryffindors would be Slytherins now. But why was *she* still in Gryffindor?

She raced down the Great Hall, and finally spotted a large group of Slytherins emerging from breakfast. She saw Alicia Spinnet... Neville Longbottom... Ginny Weasley...

And there was Ron.

“Ron! Ron!” Hermione hollered and ran up to him. “Something crazy’s going on, Ron! I was –“

“The only thing crazy here is you!” Ron snarled and looked at her with pure dislike. “Go away!”

“Hey, look here, Ron. I’m sorry about what I said last night – I really am! Now will you help me figure out what’s going on!”

But Ron wasn’t listening. He was talking to Parvati Patil and whatever he was saying was apparently very funny. The girl shrieked with uncontrollable laughter. Parvati slid her arm through Ron’s who smiled down at her and made a “crazy – loco” gesture towards Hermione. Parvati shrieked once again.

Hermione stared at Ron and Parvati, momentarily in disgust. *How low can you get?* she thought. Then she spotted Harry. Well, he’d always been more willing to hear her apologies anyways.



“Harry!” she grabbed his arm to pull him away from Lavender Brown, who (Hermione most annoyingly noted) had her arms wrapped around Harry’s waist. “I wanted t –“

Harry flung Hermione backwards so forcefully that she lost her balance and landed hard on the floor, skidding an inch or two.

“Don’t touch me, you filthy Mudblood!” Harry yelled, his eyes fairly blazing.

The “Slytherins” roared with raucous laughter. As Hermione looked from laughing face to laughing face, she sickly realized that these people were no longer her friends. They each had the same opinion about her: the name Harry had so loathingly called her.

Tears trickled down her face and she slowly stood up. It felt as though a dull knife had pierced her heart, and each time a Gryffindor – Slytherin, rather – laughed and pointed and jeered and mocked, it twisted and turned and cut deeper.

Especially when she saw Ron’s face.

Hermione backed away from them, unsure of what to do, where to go, who to turn to.

*What have I done!*

## Chapter 2

Hermione sullenly returned to the Common Room, still unsure of what to do. When she entered, Pansy and that other Slytherin - uh, Gryffindor - girl were sitting on the couch, looking thoroughly upset.

"What's *wrong* with her? I - " Pansy broke off her tear choked sentence when she heard Hermione enter. Pansy and the girl stood up looking startled.

"Hermione?" Pansy's lip trembled uncertainly.

Perhaps it was because Hermione was still shell-shocked, or because of the Pansy *she* knew, or a combination of both, but Hermione just swooshed past them not saying a word. Hermione knew that even if this was a "new" Pansy Parkinson, she would likely never be able to shake the memories of the old Pansy.

Hermione briefly had the image of Slytherin Pansy Parkinson laughing shrilly as Draco Malfoy swooned and pretended to faint, as she, Harry and Ron walked past in their third year.

Hermione plodded up the steps to the girls dormitories, fighting back tears. Once there, she sat down dejectedly on the bed.

What happened? Why? How? Why were all the Slytherins Gryffindors, and all the Gryffindors Slytherins? Why was *she* still in Gryffindor when all of her friends weren't? How could she get things back to normal?

*What happened?!*

It slowly dawned on Hermione right then. The coin... the wish...

*'Begin a sentence with 'I wish'...' '*

*"I wish it was different! I wish everything was different! I wish I had two best friends who cared about me and didn't yell at me!..."*

Hermione's eyes overflowed with tears. "No no no... " she whispered repeatedly to herself. "No, please no, please no..."

She wiped her eyes and hastily pulled the coin from her robes' pocket. It now read,

*"Thank you! Your wish has been granted! Hope it's what you really wanted! Have a swell day!"*

She swallowed hard, and searched for any more tiny print - anything - but there definitely was none. She re-pocketed the coin, lay down on her back on her bed, buried her face in her hands and began crying her heart out once again. The second time in two days.

When there were no more tears to cry, Hermione choked with dry sobs for a few moments then became quiet, alone with her thoughts.

She kept picturing Harry yelling and flinging her back.

*"Don't touch me you filthy Mudblood!"*

And Ron. His face and the pure dislike that was all across it whenever he looked at her. Parvati, hanging on his arm shrieking with laughter... Lavender kissing Harry's cheek and ruffling his hair... Ginny sticking her tongue out... the Creevey brothers with their horrid jeers amongst the laughter...

*"Slime!"*

*"Go back to the hole you crawled from!"*

Now they were all yelling.

*"Unwelcome!"* Alicia Spinnet screamed and pointed.

Lee Jordan said something that Hermione didn't quite hear, but dared not repeat.

*"Get out, get out! GET OUT!"*

It wasn't until there was a small knock at the door that Hermione realized she'd dozed off. She awoke with a start, thankful to be pulled from her nightmare. The knock sounded again, but Hermione ignored it.

Her clock told her it was four after twelve. Lunch - her stomach growled noisily.

The door slowly opened. "Hermione?" It was the other girl; the one Hermione did not know the name of.

Hermione didn't respond. She just laid there, renewed tears silently trickling down the sides of her face.

"Are you... ok?" the girl asked tentatively.

"No." Hermione said, her voice choked with emotion.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" the girl quietly shut the door and slowly, cautiously walked towards Hermione. When Hermione didn't answer, the girl asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Hermione sniffed and sat up. "No. No one can. Not unless you can reverse time and get me my best friends back."

The girl looked hurt and confused. "I... I thought... / was your best friend..."

Hermione looked at the girl with tears in her eyes. "Look, I don't know what happened, okay? I had a life which is now gone. In that life you were not my best friend. Maybe in this new life which *you* obviously remember, we were best friends. I don't know. I don't know anything anymore."

Hermione rubbed her eyes and added, "If I hurt your feelings now or later because I don't know anything, then I apologize now. I'm sorry. But whatever happened, I need to fix it."

The girl looked more confused, but less hurt. "What happened? Can you tell me?" she asked quietly and sat down on Hermione's trunk.

Hermione sighed. "Can I ask you a question first?"

The girl nodded.

"What's your name?"

The girl made a small noise like she'd been poked in the side with a sharp pencil. "M-my name?"

Hermione sighed again. "As you may recall, I said that I don't remember *anything* before this morning. This - that - yours and mine life... before. Nothing, alright? Bear with me here."

The girl swallowed and nodded quickly. "Right. Well then, my name is Allaiyah Minstrel. But you call - *called* me, Ally."

"Allaiyah - Ally - Minstrel. Okay." Hermione nodded.

Ally cocked her head sideways and looked at Hermione thoughtfully. "You really don't remember anything?"

Hermione shook her head. "Just the life I know. Which has somehow disappeared."

"What happened to cause that?" Ally asked.

"Well, yesterday I was out walking and..." Hermione told Ally the whole story - including the phenomena she'd experienced that night. Ally listened well, nodding here and there.

"See, last night I felt chilled and I thought there was wind blowing, but I wasn't awake enough to be sure." Ally said when Hermione had finished. "But I have no memory of this 'other life' you - we apparently had."

Hermione gave a very brief description of what kind of people Harry, Ron, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy used to be like. Ally was horrified and intrigued at the same time.

"So, in your other life, Malfoy was a slimy git?" said Ally.

"Oh and worse. He's basically the most horrible person ever to cross the Earth. Well, other than... He Who Must Not Be Named, obviously."

"Who?"

Hermione stuttered at Ally's reaction. "H-he Who Must Not Be Named! You know, V-v-v..." she cleared her throat. *Just say it!* she thought. "V-voldemort."

Ally stared blankly at Hermione. "Um, ok. I've never heard of - what was it? - Vole-dee-mort."

Hermione cringed slightly as Ally fairly butchered the Dark Lord's name. "You haven't? But he's murdered loads of people! He's the most evil and feared wizard of all time."

"Really?" Ally shrugged. "I don't watch the news or read the paper."

Hermione gaped at Ally. "You really don't know who he is? My goodness, Ally! He murdered Harry's parents! Harry's got that scar on his head because he's the Boy Who Lived!"

"Uh, Hermione?" Ally blinked in confusion. "Harry doesn't have a scar, or whatever."

"Of course he does. It's not exactly hard to miss. He's always trying to flatten his hair down over it so people won't stare, but people do anyways. He..." She trailed off as Ally continued to regard her as if she was speaking another language.

"Perhaps you are getting your 'worlds' mixed up. Harry doesn't *have* a scar on his forehead. Harry's parents are very powerful people who work at the Ministry of Magic. Alive and well - unfortunately."

"What?"

"It's true."

"What about Fudge?"

"What? Fudge? What does food have to do with this - "Ally raised an eyebrow.

"No, no. Cornelius Fudge!"

"What about him?"

"He's the Minister! He can back me up on all this." Hermione threw her hands up.

"Since when? He's head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

"But then who's the Minister of Magic?"

"Ludo Bagman, of course!" Ally said exasperatedly. "Jeepers Hermione! Are you just messing with me or what?"

"Of course not, I - "

"You really *don't* remember anything, *do* you?" Ally shook her head almost in awe of her friend's missing memory.

Hermione shook head back, and her eyes filled with tears against her will.

Everything was wrong. Everything was different. Just like she'd so wrongly wished.

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Monday morning came, and Hermione dazedly headed down to the Great Hall by herself for her first meal since her wish.

After Hermione had finished talking with Ally, Hermione had curled up in bed and refused to have lunch or supper. She needed to think and be alone. She wanted no part in being friends with Draco Malfoy - changed or not.

When Hermione walked in, the Gryf - Slytherins pointed and jeered and mocked the way she'd been with Harry and Ron. The Raven - Hufflepuffs ignored her as did the new Ravenclaws. And the new Slyt - Gryffindors already at the table having breakfast beckoned her over.

The Gryffindors talked about everyday things, not making Hermione obligated to join in the conversation. For that, she was grateful.

Hermione ate slowly, even though she was practically ravenous with hunger. As she ate, she studied the staff table and the people sitting at it.

Snape looked mostly the same, although his hair wasn't greasy or stringy. It was clean and neatly pulled back, and his skin didn't look as pale as usual. Professor McGonagall's hair was in a loose ponytail and she looked less stern, but at the same time more disgusted with absolutely everything. Professor Flitwick was at least six feet tall. Professor Sprout was thin. Professor Binns wasn't a ghost. In fact, there was something slightly different about every teacher except Dumbledore, who looked positively unchanged. She didn't see Hagrid, and wondered where he was. She'd have to ask Ally later.

Hermione turned in her seat to regard the other students. She recognized so many... but who were her friends? And who were her enemies? She didn't know, and she wasn't sure how to find out.

There was Ron - sitting with Parvati. She flipped her hair around and laughed heartily. Ron handed her his last piece of bacon. Hermione bit her lip. He'd never done that to her before. Lavender Brown sat too close to Harry. There was Neville... Ginny... Seamus Finnigan... Dean Thomas... Colin and Dennis Creevey... Katie Bell... Angelina Johnson... Lee Jordan... Alicia Spinnet...

Hermione looked to the Ravenclaw table. There sat all the people she knew to be Hufflepuffs. Hannah Abbott... Susan Bones... Ernie Macmillan... Zacharias Smith... Justin Flinch-Fletcher... Kevin Whitby... Cedric Diggory...

Hermione did a double take. *Cedric?* She gaped openly at him. He was alive! But then again, if there was no Voldemort, then all the people he killed must be alive. People like Bertha Jorkins and Lily and James Potter. What were their lives like, not cut short by an evil wizard?

And if there was no Voldemort, then surely there were no followers of Voldemort. What were the Malfoys like? And Neville's parents? How were they? How was *anyone* whose lives had been touched by Voldemort and his followers?



After her initial shock, Hermione scanned the new Hufflepuffs. There was Cho Chang... Marietta Edgecomb... Micheal Corner... Luna Lovegood... Terry Boot... Padma Patil... Lisa Turpin...

Hermione sighed and surveyed her new Gryffindors. Millicent Bulstrode... Theodore Nott... Gregory Goyle... Draco Malfoy... Vincent Crabbe... Pansy Parkinson... Graham Pritchard... Malcolm Baddock... Miles Bletchley... Ally Minstrel...

She once again felt like crying. She didn't belong. Nothing belonged. Why oh *why* was she so careless in her wishing?

"Hey." Ally nudged Hermione. "You alright?"

Hermione shook her head and inadvertently glanced at Ron.

Ally didn't ask, she already understood. "Just don't think about it."

"How can I *not*?" Hermione whispered.

Ally shrugged then changed the subject. "We have Transfiguration first, then Potions."

Hermione nodded. She'd have to pull herself together before she went to class. One question lingered in her mind as she finished eating her scrambled eggs. How was she going to concentrate in class when her world was totally upside down?

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Thankfully, other than the visible differences, most of the Professors hadn't changed. They still taught the same subjects as before. Professor Binns still droned on and on about Goblin Wars, and Professor Sprout gave them a quick review about potting Mandrakes before having them read their text books about Gloriteldna Grass.

Other Professors, however, were completely different. For example, Professors Snape and McGonagall. Closer up, Hermione saw that McGonagall's hair was greasy and stringy in that loose ponytail. Her usually impeccably clean robes looked old and dingy. She was downright mean to everyone and gave Goyle a five scroll essay on why he should do his homework. She deducted ten points from

Millicent for sneezing too loudly while McGonagall was teaching. This extreme change in McGonagall deeply saddened Hermione even more because McGonagall had been one Professor that Hermione felt she could really trust with anything.

Snape, on the other hand, had clean sleek hair tied neatly back. He actually *smiled!* He gave Crabbe six points for answering a question right. He gave Pansy fifteen points for having the best Potion in the class. (Hermione hadn't been concentrating at all, to account for her poor Potion.) He was actually being kind to the Gryffindors!

"Ya, why wouldn't he be?" Ally asked when Hermione commented on the fact. "He's head of Gryffindor, after all."

Indeed, instead of his usual swishing slightly dusty old black robes, Snape wore deep scarlet coloured robes with the legendary Gryffindor lion crest emblazoned on his chest.

Heading back to Gryffindor Tower after a grueling second class of Transfiguration, Dumbledore stopped Hermione.

"Miss Granger!" he called.

"Yes, sir?"

"A moment, if you please."

"Yes sir."

Her fellow students stared at her with curious wondering eyes as she followed Dumbledore to his office.

Once they had arrived, Dumbledore gestured to a large cushy red chair. "Sit, please."

Hermione obeyed.

Dumbledore also sat. He slowly intertwined his fingers and then stared down his crooked nose through his half-moon shaped spectacles.

"Is there something you need to tell me about, Miss Granger?" he said gently.

In a span of about half a second, Hermione briefly searched her mind, thinking, *Have I done something wrong?* But then the dreadful wish and the coin came to mind a second after Dumbledore's question.

She looked up, straight into Dumbledore's calm blue eyes. He already knew.

Hermione wasted no time. She immediately plunged into her story, starting with finding the coin and ending with her last Transfiguration class, not leaving out a single detail.

When she was finished, Dumbledore merely inclined his head slightly and said, "I thought so."

"But how did you know it was me?"

"You and I were the only two who remained unchanged. As I knew 'twas not myself, I could only assume 'twas you."

"Oh." Hermione paused. "H-how do I fix it? How do I make things back to the way they were?"

"Were there any directions on the mysterious coin?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione shook her head. "It told me how to make a wish, and it said... it said that m-most wishes are irreversible." She sniffed.

"Ah. I see." Dumbledore slowly nodded, looking thoughtful. "Something of a very similar nature happened a few years ago. A young girl wished to be appreciated and turned Hogwarts upside down. I remained unchanged in that instance as well. She came to me and begged me to tell her what to do. As I once had to perform a wish reversal, I knew what to do. Naturally, I told her. And in time, she was able to reverse or 'take back' her wish. The next morning, after she had performed the 'wish reversal', everything was back to the way it had been when she made the wish. No one remembered the

incident except for herself and I. We kept it a secret, just in case." he smiled as he finished.

Hermione sucked in her breath. "How do I reverse it? How do I make everything normal? Oh Professor, I would do *anything*!"

Dumbledore chuckled and cracked his kind smile again. "Yes, yes. I believe you would." He paused and Hermione held her breath, waiting tensely to hear how to fix her world. "Well, first you must tell the coin once in a while why you wish to reverse your wish."

"Talk to the coin?" Hermione said skeptically.

"Indeed." Dumbledore nodded and then continued. "Then you must get *The Wishing Book* from the Library. It is in the Restricted section, so I shall get it for you. In this book is a potion and spell that go hand and hand. You must make the potion and drink it, prior to reciting the spell."

"Is that all?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. But the potion can take at the very least two months to make."

"Two months?!" Hermione's jaw dropped open.

"Yes, at the very *least*." Dumbledore nodded. He'd heard this before. "The other problem presented with this potion is that you must receive little or no outside help. So, someone like Professor Snape cannot make the potion for you. And you must follow all the steps *exactly* as they are written, or there could be catastrophic results."

Hermione's hope of living in her own world began to fizzle at Dumbledore's warnings.

"I realize two - or more - months seem like a very long time to live in this strange world, but it will be worth it when it is repaired, I assure you."

Hermione nodded glumly.

"And do not worry, Miss Granger." Dumbledore added. "You are a brilliant student, with top marks in everything. You will do fine."

Hermione's heart lifted a little again. "Thank you, sir."

"You're quite welcome. Now off to bed then." He smiled again and stood gracefully.

Hermione stood also. "Thank you, again, *very much*, sir."

"And again, you're quite welcome, Miss Hermione Granger."

### **Chapter 3**

Hermione fairly skipped back to the Gryffindor Tower. It was reverseable! She was going to get out of this! She would be able to hug Harry and Ron, and talk to Ginny and Neville.... The only problem now was learning to live in this world for a few months.

"Lefitoldna" Hermione gave the password to the Fat Lady when she reached the entrance to the Tower.

"Indeed." replied the Fat Lady sleepily and slowly swung open.

There was only about half a dozen people left in the Common Room when Hermione entered. One or two looked up, but the rest ignored her, being intent on finishing up last minute homework.

*'Like Harry and Ron.'* Hermione thought, half-smiling. Then a pang of sadness hit her, and she forced her thoughts away from them.

"Hermione? Can we talk?"

The voice came from Ron's favourite chair. She half-expected to see him and his red hair rise out of the chair, and say, *"Look, I'm real sorry about what I said..."*

*'Don't think about Ron!'* Hermione thought angrily.

It was Malfoy who'd spoken, and he was the one who rose out of the chair. He walked towards her looking a little scared and really worried.

"What about?" Hermione said, keeping her voice neutral. She hated Malfoy - the old Malfoy. The one she knew. The one who was in Slytherin, not Gryffindor. The one she could never shake the memories of.

"A-about us." he replied, his voice a little shaky. "Can we sit down?"

"Sure."

They sat. Hermione in her favourite chair, and Malfoy in R-

'Stop thinking about him!' Hermione thought, frustrated with herself. She cleared her throat slightly and said, "So, what is it?"

"Well, y-you've been a..... a little o-on edge, these p-past few.....d-days...." he spoke cautiously, like he was afraid Hermione would lash out suddenly.

She sighed. "Don't worry. I'm not going explode."

He looked unsure.

"I promise." She emphasized her words heavily. "I just was having a.....er...bad day."

A little relief seemed to sweep over his face and he half-smiled.

Hermione half-smiled too. When his pale pointed face wasn't despising or sneering, he actually looked like a half-decent human being.

"Do you...." Malfoy started, looking a little nervous again. "Do you remember what our.....our.....'relationship' was, before.....before....." Malfoy struggled for the right word.

"Before I made my wish and went ballistic on you for doing what you remember you've always done." Hermione finished quickly for him.

Malfoy leaned back slightly in his chair. "Well, I don't think those are the right words, but ya. Ballistic."

Hermione shook her head, answering his question. "No, I don't. I don't remember anything you remember. I don't know how you were in my other life." her face clouded at the thought her "other life". "Now there's a sentence I never thought I'd say." she added quietly, not smiling.

"Tell me." Malfoy said.

"Huh?"

"Tell me. How do *you* remember me?"

Hermione looked at him skeptically. "You don't want to know, believe me."

"No, I do." he prodded.

"You *really* don't."

"I *really* do." Malfoy said stubbornly.

Hermione sighed and shrugged. "Ok, you asked for it!" she took a deep breath. "In short, you were the most slimy, disgusting, rotten, mean human being I think I've ever met." Silently to herself, Hermione added, '*Excluding Umbridge and ....He Who Must Not Be Named, of course.*'

"What!?" Malfoy stared at Hermione in disbelief. "What do you mean? What did I do?"

"You would pretty much stop at nothing to get your way, or us - Harry, Ron and I - in trouble. Usually with Snape - he hated us too. You really loathed us! You were a rat! I mean, you wanted Hagrid sacked so badly, that you would make a scene or talk trash to him and bring his confidence down so that he would screw up! You and your father - who, by the way was a Death Eater for V-v-v-oldemort - hated Dumbledore and were always looking for an excuse to get him kicked out of the school. Your dad tried to kill Harry and helped V-v-v-oldemort try and kill him - *more* than once....."

"Hermione! I....I....."

"Oh, there's more."

"More?"

"Crabbe and Goyle were stupid little sidekicks, always flexing their muscles, and cracking their knuckles. Pansy was always shrieking at your stupid taunts...You were all in Slytherin - "

"Slytherin?! Is that why you yelled at us about - "

"Yes, and I'm sorry about that."



“Forgiven. Go on...”

Hermione took another deep breath. “You loved to make Ron angry by saying horrible stuff about his family, and them being real poor, just so he would take a swing at you and get himself in loads of trouble.” She paused. This part was going to be hard to repeat, but he wanted to know.... “And....y-you even.....you even c-c-called me a-a .....a Mudblood.” A few tears filled her eyes at the painful memory. She had to smile though, when she remembered Ron trying to curse Malfoy on her behalf with his broken wand, and causing himself to puke slugs for a few hours.

Malfoy looked absolutely and deeply horrified. He opened and closed his mouth several times before being able to say anything. “Hermione! I.....I.....no! I would never - NEVER - *EVER* say that to, or even *about* ANYONE! *EVER!*” Now he looked hurt and extremely disgusted.

“Ya right you wouldn’t.” she made a small scoffing noise, and then recoiled. “Oh! I’m sorry! I mean, you - the old you - would - well, he did - but you - YOU - wouldn’t. I have to remember YOU’RE not like that...”

Malfoy nodded in understanding, and brushed off her comment. “It’s ok.” he paused, and looked nervous again. “I.....uh, Hermione? This probably isn’t the best time to tell you - especially after what you just told me. But....”

“But.....? Tell me what?”

“What we - you and I - were like before.....you know.”

Hermione nodded, then chuckled. “It can’t be that bad, can it?”

Malfoy smiled wryly. “Well, don’t hurt me, but we were.....we were sort of.....um..... .....dating.”

“WHAT?!” Hermione shot out of her chair. A few people jumped at her sudden outburst, and stared momentarily as Malfoy cringed. Hermione slowly sunk back down into her chair, quite in shock.

"I'm - I'm s-sorry, Hermione!" Malfoy apologized quickly.

"Me?! Dating *MALFOY!*?" her stomach turned at the mere thought.

"Draco, actually."

"Huh?"

"Draco. You called me Draco."

"Oh." Hermione didn't know what else to say. She knew one thing for sure however, and that was that no matter how nice this new Draco was, there was *no way* she was going to date him. Or continue dating him.... She had to tell him before he thought that they could just pick up where they left off.

"Um, Draco?"

"Yes?"

"I-I.....er, we.....can't. We can't." she cleared her throat slightly. "Look, I hate to be so blunt, but that truth is I've known you - the other you - the you I've known - for 5 whole long years. I can't.....date you."

"But I'm NOT like that other guy!" he protested.

"I know! But I can't just simply, you know, erase those memories just to make this work."

"I understand." And although he looked very disappointed, Hermione believed he really *did* understand.

"I'm sorry Draco. I just can't."

"It's alright. It really is. I was sort of expecting something like this anyway." He said. Hermione looked into his blue eyes, and could tell he really meant what he said. He wasn't hurt. For this, Hermione was quite relieved.

"Hermione?" Draco piped up again, looking a bit confused as he turned some things over in his mind.

“Yes?”

“You said – um, Ron – Ronald Weasley, right?”

“Ya. Ron Weasley.”

“Right. You said I would get down on him because he was poor?”

“That’s right. You would tell him stuff like how if his family sold their house, Ron might get a new pair of robes and a book if he was lucky.” Hermione said quickly, not allowing herself to give another thought to Ron.

“Ok..... But his family are millionaires!”

“What!? Really?!”

“Really! His family’s always going off on exotic, expensive trips over Holidays. The kids always get some extravagant gift too. Ron’s always flaunting them around....” Draco frowned. “Last Christmas, they bought everyone of their kids – and Harry – brand new Firebolts. Firebolts! Can you imagine?!” he shook his head.

*‘Harry’s already got one.’* Hermione wanted to say. Instead, she shook her head in disbelief and amusement at the thought of the Weasley’s being rich.

“Ron? Rich? MILLIONAIRES! The Weasley’s are millionaires.” She said it aloud, then smiled. She imagined Ron skiing in Switzerland, with new skis.....he waved at her.

“Better than those ruddy worthless hills around Hogwarts, eh, Hermione?” he said.

But then the image of him saying, “The only thing crazy around here is you!” intruded and her smile quickly faded. She forced her thoughts away from Ron once again.

“Malf – I mean, Draco. What else is different?”

Draco shrugged. “You tell me. What do you want to know about?”

Hermione thought for a moment, then gave a tiny laugh. "I don't know!" Suddenly her eyelids seemed very heavy, and she yawned. "But when I think of something, I'll let you know."

"Ok."

"I'm going to bed. Good night Mal – Draco."

Draco smiled. "G'night, Hermione."

## **Chapter 4**

Tuesday morning dawned. Two days since Hermione's disastrous wish had come true.

She tried to follow her routine with the rest of her house, but everything was so strange. She continually was thinking about Dumbledore's words to her about wish reversal, why she hadn't seen Hagrid around anywhere, what the world was like outside of Hogwarts, and many other things. Her mind was pretty well anywhere else than on her studies.

Still, she *was* after all, Hermione Granger, so even though she wasn't trying as hard as she knew she usually did, she was easily turning a serious effort which for some reason was surprising to all the Professors.

Tuesday morning was relatively uneventful. Dumbledore gave her the "Wish Book" from the Restricted Section and reminded her not to forget to talk to the coin. She thanked him repeatedly and then dashed to the Gryffindor Tower to stash it in her trunk, laying the coin on top of the book.

Although she ran as fast as she could, she still ended up being late for her first Charms class since her wish.

She wasn't the only one.

Hermione turned the corner sharply, head down, trying to yank her Charms book out of her heavy bag. Obviously she wasn't watching where she was going.

The other person was mumbling to himself about Quidditch this and Professor that, as he was attempting to read over a few pages in his textbook, all while running.

At the exact same second, both looked up but it was easily a second too late. Both made an "Ooh! Oops!" type noise and they smashed into each other, knocking each to the ground. Books fell here and there, papers fluttered, and everything landed in one big mixed up pile.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Hermione apologized and hurriedly tried to separate her papers from the others and gather them up.

“No, no. It was totally my fault. I wasn’t watching where I was going.” he raked his hand through his thick curly, chestnut-coloured hair.

“Neither was I...” they looked up at the same moment, and Hermione saw the gray-blue eyes of Cedric Diggory looking back at her.

Her cheeks flushed pink and her stomach did an unexpected flutter. He blushed some too, then turned back his papers which he was trying to jam into his books.

She said nothing as she shoved her papers into her bag quickly. She’d organize them later.

“Charms?” Cedric asked.

“Yes.”

“Me too.” he smiled.

“Good thing Flitwick’s not too hard on people who are late, huh?” Hermione said and stood.

Cedric stood and laughed. “Good one.” he said.

Hermione didn’t understand why he thought that her comment was funny, but she didn’t ask. They jogged to the second floor, clutching their books and papers. Hermione noticed Cedric take a deep breath and brace himself for something just before he entered the Charms classroom.

“MR. DIGGORY! MISS GRANGER!” The loud, deep voice boomed through the classroom as soon as Hermione and Cedric had set foot into it. Hermione jumped at the voice. It was coming from Professor Flitwick! Tiny, white haired, squeaky Professor Flitwick, who was now standing at the front of his classroom, tall, with his hand on his hip, bellowing at the latecomers. Everyone turned in their seats to look. “Is this a free-for-all, that you can walk in whenever you please?”

"No sir." Cedric mumbled, and quickly took his seat.

"Then take your seats. 5 points from each Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor." Flitwick stated. He was about to turn back to his chalkboard when he saw Hermione not moving. "Is something **WRONG** Miss Granger?"

Hermione closed her mouth, shook her head and quickly sat down.

As Flitwick handed out the homework, he commented that Cedric had been late twice this week already and told that if it happened again, there would be a higher point deduction.

Hermione thought about how positively strange it was to up at a 6-foot-tall Flitwick, who referred to Cedric Diggory, of Ravenclaw.

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It was nearly lights out when Hermione sat on her bed and pulled out the Wishing Coin. She stared at it long and hard before speaking.

'Talk to the coin.' she thought, remembering what Dumbledore had said. 'Tell it why you want to reverse the wish.'

"Um, Coin?" she whispered. "I...I don't *want* this...anymore. This...this...upside down world. I want my old friends back. I want Harry back. I want Ron back."

The coin just glinted in the low light coming from her bedside lamp.

'Should I say more?' she thought.

"Um...the...the Weasleys! Yes, they were poor, but they were poor and wonderful. Especially Ron. And now they're rich, but they're awful. I...I want them back to the way they were. And Ron. I want Ron back. *Especially* Ron."

Hermione didn't really know what else to say, or even if she supposed to say anything more at that moment, so she re-stashed the coin on top of the book in her trunk, turned off the lamp, and went to sleep.

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Wednesday morning.

Hermione was just about to go out of the Common Room and head down to breakfast when Goyle stopped her.

“Oy! Hermione!”

“Yes?”

“You missed Quidditch practice again!” he said irritably.

“I *what?!?*”

“I said,” Goyle put his thick hands on his thick hips. “You missed Quidditch practice. *AGAIN!*” he repeated.

“But I...I don’t...I d-don’t...” She? Hermione Granger? Bookworm and homework-aholic? A *Quidditch player?*

“Look, Graham decided to do practices as often as possible. We 2 last week - one of which you missed. Then we had another one Sunday afternoon. You were in a right state, so I didn’t bother you then, but you knew we were having one last night.” Goyle explained. “Why didn’t you show up?” his eyes widened suddenly, “You’re not *quitting* are you!?”

“Well, I - I...n-no...I... guess n-not...b-b-but I - “

”Good, Then we can expect you at the next practice, tomorrow night, then?”

“Wel...n-n-no...Goyle, I *don’t play Quidditch!*” Hermione finally spit out.

“Ya, you do...?” Goyle said confusedly. He hesitated before saying, “Why’d you call me that?”

“What?”

“Goyle. Why’d you call me ‘Goyle’?”

Hermione blinked. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”



"Well, ya, my last name. But you always called me Greg. You know, short for Gregory - my first name."

"Oh. Sorry Goy - er, Gregory - er, Greg. I mean." she hated it when people corrected her like that. It made her quite flustered and uncomfortable trying to remember what they thought she remembered but really she didn't and - now she was just confusing herself. "Er, what did I call Crabbe?"

"Vinny."

"Oh. His first name's Vincent, right?"

"Right."

Hermione made a mental note to remember what she was not supposed to call Crabbe and Goyle by their last names in the future. She cleared her throat and said, "S-s-so. I played Quidditch?"

Goy - Greg nodded. "Ya. You are - were - are - uh, ya. A Chaser, anyway. A real good one."

Hermione raised an eyebrow interest. A Chaser? She'd always thought the Chasers had the coolest and most exciting job on the pitch anyways.

"So what time is the next practice?" she asked. Maybe in this crazy parallel universe, she could be good at Quidditch like everyone thought she was. It was long shot, but worth a try.

"Usually 7:00 pm, unless Graham lets you know otherwise."

"Ok." Hermione smiled fully for the first time in a long time. "I'll be there. And I'll try my best."

This was going to be great.

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Hermione was thankful for her ability to learn routines and timetables quickly. She was still unsure of how her timetables were at the time, but she was quite sure that she would have it down by next week.

Ally told her that they had Charms and Care of Magical Creatures with Ravenclaw, Herbology and Potions with Hufflepuff, leaving Transfiguration and Astronomy with Slytherin. All other classes were just Gryffindors.

Her 2 favourite classes - Transfiguration and Astronomy - were now her least favourite classes by far. McGonagall was wretched to the Gryffindors, and the Slytherins were still racking on Hermione very much the chance they got. Every time she entered the classroom, there were taunts and jeers. They worsened after one time Hermione protested to an unfair deduction by McGonagall and Harry heard her say to Ally that McGonagall was horrible.

"Oh, Ron! Ron! Everything's crazy! Save me from McGonagall!" Ron made a girlish voice, clasped his hands under his chin and openly mocked Hermione. Parvati shrieked with uncontrollable laughter, and Hermione was forcibly reminded of the old Pansy Parkinson.

The Gryffindors glared and defended Hermione, but that didn't stop the Slytherins from muttering insults and giving her rude shoves whenever they met her in the hall. "Slime", "dirt", "filth", "out of her mind", "crazy", and "disgusting" seemed to follow her where ever she went, even if there was just one Slytherin nearby.

"Filth" seemed to be Harry's choice of word, as he said it every time he walked past Hermione. And every time, Lavender would laugh and stick her tongue out at Hermione. Besides that, her arm seemed to have been permanently attached to Harry's waist. She never saw one without the other.

She was on neutral terms with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, having not been real great friends with any of them even in her universe.

Through it all, she was trying to keep faithful in reading the Wish Book, and talking to the coin nightly.

## **Chapter 5**

Thursday evening, 7:00 sharp, Hermione headed to the Quidditch pitch. She was glad that the sun was still in the sky, enough to give them sufficient light for practise.

She would probably never admit it, especially to Harry and Ron, but she actually really enjoyed Quidditch - to an extent. She was not an extreme fan like Harry or Ron, but she liked it. She liked watching it, and had always wanted to try and play it. She'd never bothered to try out, however, because you couldn't learn Quidditch from a book, and Hermione was the book type, not the sportsy type.

Just as she reached the doors for the pitch, she suddenly realized she had no Quidditch robes, nor a broom to ride. Maybe she would just watch the other, and try to pick up a few pointers.

She sighed and entered the Gryffindor locker room where the rest of the team was already dressed and hurriedly walking out onto the field.

"Hurry up and get dressed Hermione!" Malfoy called and jogged toward the door. "Graham wants to get started right away!"

"But - Drac - wait! I have no...." she let her sentence trail when he clearly didn't hear her, and disappeared beyond the change room door.

She looked around in despair. Possibly she could play in the plain school robes she was wearing. She *did* have an extra pair in the door. But what about a broom? She looked around and figured she would have to borrow one of the schools old Cleansweeps or something.

Hermione walked slowly towards the back of the room where she saw some of the old school brooms leaning in a nicely kept cabinet. As she walked, she stared around the room, never having really looked at it before. It took her merely seconds to see anything worth seeing.

Clean robes hanging here or there, dirty robes sprawled across the floor. The roof was wooden with beams supporting it, and there was a pair of shoes tied together by the laces and hanging over one of the

beams. They looked as though they had been there for eternity, and she wondered why no one had bothered to get them down. There was very minimal graffiti, and the one that made her smile was "JAMES LOVES LILY". She touched it, and once again found herself aching for her world, although the Potters would not exist.

*'Better to have existed and died as wonderful people than to still be alive and be absolutely horrid.'* Hermione thought and stared down the line of lockers, each with a name engraved upon a gold plaque attached to the face of the locker. Hermione stopped to examine the names.

"Vincent Crabbe Beater.....Gregory Goyle Beater..... Theodore Nott Chaser..... Millicent Bulstrode Chaser....." Hermione sucked in her breath sharply. The next plaque read, "Hermione Granger Chaser".

She stood in front of it, her heart pounding, and she slowly creaked open the locker - except that it didn't creak. Inside, was a brand new looking Nimbus 2000, and a set of clean fresh Gryffindor Quidditch robes - just in her size!

Hermione's face lit up. This was *hers*!

There was a pounding on the door to the change room and Hermione jumped. "Hurry up Granger!" someone yelled. "We don't have all night, you know!"

She nodded and called, "Coming!"

She scooped up her beautiful robes and got changed into them faster than she'd ever gotten changed in her life, all the while her pulse was racing with excitement.

Once onto the pitch (amidst a grumble or two of her being late), she mounted her broom as she had seen Ron and Harry do millions of times. It was less than graceful as she ascended up into the air, and rather shaky. Still, the point was that she was on the broom. Yet, in spite of her constant wobbling as she attempted to get into position, she was surprised at how comfortable she felt. The way she was on the broom, was almost like she had been a perfect player all her

childhood, quit a long time ago and was just now remembering how to do it.

"Right then! Let's get going!" Graham Pritchard, the Captain and Keeper for Gryffindor, said and tossed the Quaffle to Theodore Nott, one of the other Chasers. It vaguely occurred to Hermione that this Slytherin team was different than the one she knew (wasn't Graham younger?) But she really couldn't remember and decided it did not matter.

Nott threw the Quaffle to Millicent as Graham sped down the pitch to take up his post as Keeper. Draco was off finding the Snitch, and Greg and Vinny were taking turns whacking the Bludgers. Millicent threw the Quaffle to Hermione, who panicked slightly, shot out one hand to catch the red ball, and missed completely. Her hand shot just as quick back to her broom, as she was suddenly afraid she would fall.

"What was that!?" Nott exclaimed once he'd dove to retrieve the Quaffle.

Hermione's face turned a shade of red. "I.....I....." Truth was, she was not exactly comfortable with letting go of the broom with one hand to catch the ball, which she probably couldn't catch anyway, with only one hand, then pass it. She had enough trouble catching a ball *period*, let alone up in the air, on a stick, with one hand. "I.....missed."

Books were her thing. She didn't have the greatest coordination, and certainly not very good aim. And to multi-task like this? Well, of course she could multi-task. But this was a very different kind of multi-tasking. This was going to require a lot more concentration and skill. The skill which she was quite sure she did not possess.

Nott shook his head. "Try it again then." He threw the ball to Millicent who tossed the ball lightly to Hermione - an easy catch. Again Hermione took her hand off the broom, wobbled, and then she lost her balance a little as the ball smacked into her hand. When she had contact with the ball, she tried to curl her fingers around the ball, but failed when she yanked her hand back to her broom to steady herself. The ball dropped a second time because of her.

"Hermione!" Theodore Nott said frustratedly and swooped down to scoop up the Quaffle for the second time. "*Catch the Quaffle!*"

"Sorry....." Hermione said meekly, her cheeks feeling hot. She usually didn't fail. She swallowed.

"Ready?" Nott said, and held up the ball.

Hermione shook her head. "Wait. Just give me a minute." She shut her eyes and try to calm herself. She could do this..... she'd seen it done dozens of times..... hundreds maybe..... think of how Angelina does it..... she'd studied Quidditch.....*how to play.....how to play.....*

Hermione tried mightily to recall all that she had read. The directions..... the diagrams.....the moves..... the techniques.....

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. "Ya. I'm ready."

Theodore threw the ball to Millicent, who threw the ball to Hermione..... Hermione leaned forward, ever so slightly accelerating her broom, reached up with one hand and clasped her hand around the oddly shaped red Quaffle at the right moment, and.....

"I caught it!" she fairly shrieked, very surprised and happy with herself.

Millicent laughed, and Theodore clapped. "That's more like it!" he said.

Hermione tossed the ball back to Theodore. The 3 Chasers tried different simple passes until Hermione began to get the hang of it and to complete their warm-up. Slowly they began to move onto more complicated moves and combinations and taking turns shooting at Graham Pritchard. The more they practised and played, the more comfortable and balanced Hermione felt, and the better she caught, threw and moved.

Finally, nearly 3 hours later, when it finally became to dark to continue, the tired and dirty players came in for a landing. They

dismounted and Hermione was very sore, not used to being on a broom and working hard like that.

Draco dismounted beside Hermione and gave her a pat on the back. "Good job up there. I was watching for a bit, and the more you played the better you got."

Hermione sighed, her body aching and her eyes heavy. "Thanks." she mumbled.

Draco smiled. "I know the feeling. But I'm more used to it."

She glanced at him, glad he was remembering that she had never played Quidditch before. Again, she mumbled, "Thanks."

She and the other players changed into their clean school robes, closed up their lockers and Graham locked up the change room. The air outside was pleasantly cool, but not too cool. It was just right with an ever so slight breeze and sparkling stars above. Hermione felt as though she could lay down right there on the grass and go to sleep.

They entered the Entrance Hall, and began ascending the marble staircase. Near the second floor, they met up with Ally and Pansy coming from the library after trying to finish their Potions homework and being kicked out by Madame Pince.

A little bit later, as they were on the sixth floor, Professor McGonagall came bustling angrily down the hallway, her slick pony-tail waving behind her head.

"HERMIONE GRANGER!" she yelled.

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. She and the rest of her chattering friends had had their backs to the hallway and now cut off their conversations abruptly. "P-Professor! What is it!?"

McGonagall was holding up Hermione's most recent essay ("*Describe the transformation of an Animagi and why*") which had a glaring red "**A**" scrawled across it. Hermione had spent a long night finishing it and just handed it in yesterday with the rest of the class.

"WHAT IS THIS!?" McGonagall shook the paper furiously.

"M-m-y essay....?" Hermione answered unsteadily.

"I KNOW ITS YOUR ESSAY!" McGonagall stomped her foot causing the group to all jump once again. "I MEAN WHY IS THERE AN 'A' ON IT?!"

"I - b-because....." Hermione wanted to say it was because she had worked hard on that essay and stayed up late finishing it. She was book smart and loved to prove it through essays and such. But by the vibe that the Professor was giving off at the moment, Hermione had the feeling that would not be an acceptable answer.

"Because you wrote it on there!" Vinny said, thinking himself to be funny and clever. A few people chuckled despite the reaction they assumed was to come next, considering McGonagall's present mood.

Indeed, McGonagall turned her furious blazing eyes to stare Vinny into the ground. The smile on his face disappeared instantly. "5 POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR!" she spat slightly as she shouted. "FOR SPEAKING WHEN NOT SPOKEN TO!"

Vinny's mouth hung open in what would have been a protest, but no words were emitted from his mouth for that he would only make the situation worse and the Professor would deduct more points.

McGonagall's eyes shot back to Hermione. "WHO DID YOU CHEAT OFF OF!?" she demanded and flapped the paper around.

"I - no one!" Hermione said offendedly. She? Hermione Granger? *Cheat!?* "I have never cheated in my life!"

Pansy, Graham, and a few others looked at her skeptically. Hermione made a mental note to ask them why when Professor McGonagall was finished with her irate rampage.

McGonagall's cheeks began to turn red. "20 POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR FOR LYING!!!"

"I am not lying!" Hermione protested desperately.



"ANOTHER 10 FOR DENYING IT!" McGonagall screamed.

The Gryffindors groaned. Already this little encounter had cost them 35 points. Judging by the way McGonagall seemed not to be finished, they expected there would be more deductions before this argument ceased.

"Professor," Hermione fought to keep her voice calm. "I stayed up all night working on that essay. If I copied it, please tell me who I copied it from?!" Luckily, Hermione was quite good at gauging how well her fellow students had done with this particular essay. And she was quick sure no had scored as high as her.

McGonagall's eyes burned menacingly. "SO YOU *COPIED* THEN, DID YOU?!" she was beyond irate. Hermione had never seen anyone so mad in her entire life. "50 POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR!!!"

The other Gryffindors winced and grit their teeth. Some clenched their fist while others turned away. *85 points!*

"AND - "McGonagall was clutching the paper tightly in her left hand which was finally at her side, while her right hand was pointing straight at Hermione. She was about to say something more - Hermione was glad she did not get to find out what - when Professor Snape glided up to the group, cutting McGonagall off with a loud and firm,

"That will do."

McGonagall turned sharply to face him, her robes swirling at her feet.

"That shall be *quite enough*, Minerva." Snape spoke with authoritative confidence, not the smug dislike Hermione was used to. He slowly crossed his arms over his chest challengingly.

McGonagall's eyes snapped from Snape to Hermione and back to Snape. Her nostrils flared. "*PROFESSOR!* Just LOOK at this ESSAY!!!" she shoved the paper at him, crumpling it more.

Hermione wanted to grab the essay away from them, to stop it from being further damaged, but she held her hands and her tongue. '*Just wait.*' she thought.

Snape scanned the essay briefly before handing it back. "I see no problem with it at all."

"That's the *POINT!*" McGonagall snarled. "She OBVIOUSLY cheated! And she even admits copying!"

Ally shook her head. "Not true Professor!" She spoke directly to Snape, ignoring McGonagall. "Hermione merely said *if* she had copied, then who from, because if no scored as high as her, then she couldn't have copied."

Hermione breathed a little and shot a smile at Ally who returned it.

"HUSH!" McGonagall attempted to silence Ally.

"Thank you, Miss Minstrel." he turned his attention back to McGonagall.

"As I said before she - "McGonagall started but Snape cut her off.

"*Did* anyone score as high as Miss Granger?" he asked.

McGonagall seemed flustered. She glanced at the students and Snape alternately before mumbling out, "Well, .....no....." she straightened and tried again. "But she *OBVIOUSLY* - "

Again, Snape interrupted. "Then she is *OBVIOUSLY* a brilliant student who knows her stuff about Animagi!" He countered unwaveringly.

McGonagall's arm snapped rigidly to her side. Her eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth to say something but closed it again. She took another icy glance at the student before giving a great swish of her robes, letting the essay flutter to the floor, and stalking furiously back down the hall.

Snape gently scooped up the discarded essay and handed it back to Hermione. He smiled - the most kind smile (the only smile) Hermione had ever seen on Snape's pale face. It shocked her to see that smile that was so full of everything that Snape - the Snape she knew - was not.

"Maybe you didn't cheat this time, Hermione" - a few of the Gryffindors snickered - "but it would be best *not* to get on her bad side." he grinned that pleasant grin again, and added in an undertone, "Not that she *has* a good side....."

They all laughed this time.

"But please be careful. No more cheating or copying. And those goes for all of you." They nodded. Hermione did too, although she *knew* she had not cheated or copied.

"Now, I must say," Snape continued. "It *was* an excellent essay." he paused. "20 points to Hermione for that impossibly stupid essay." she beamed, although she'd found the essay rather interesting, and Snape looked thoughtful. "25 points for dealing with an enraged teacher fairly." he looked them all over. "20 points for an excellent Quidditch practice." he winked at Graham who grinned. "And.....how about 5 points to Pansy and Ally for doing their homework?"

The Gryffindors buzzed quietly at the new addition of points, enough and more to make up for the deductions by McGonagall.

"Oh, and heads up," Snape added. "I'm giving you all a pop quiz on Gillyweed tomorrow."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "Not much of a Pop Quiz, now, is it?"

Snape nodded and winked again. "Exactly." With that last word, he turned and strode merrily away, his scarlet robes swaying behind him.

The Gryffindors, once again washed with tiredness and now added with relief after their encounter with McGonagall, tried to hurry on their way to Gryffindor Tower, not wanting to meet up with her again.

"Ally?"

"Ya?"

"I cheated?"

Ally cheeks went slightly pink. "Um, ya. A lot."

Hermione's mouth hung open. "What!?" she had really been hoping it was a baseless accusation from McGonagall and not the usual truth.

Ally sighed a little. "Oh ya. You cheated all the time. But it never really paid off before though. You always had failing or near failing grades. Maybe a satisfactory type one if you were lucky." She said it all very matter-of-factly, and it troubled Hermione.

"I can't *believe* it. I've *never* cheated in my life!" Hermione was floored. She'd never gotten grades less than satisfactory. That was of course excluding Snape's Potions class, but really, other than Malfoy, who *actually* did well in that class?

"Don't sound so shocked. I just said you cheated all the time."

Hermione sighed. "I never cheated in my other life. My OTHER life."

"Oh, right. Its hard not to get your lives mixed up, Hermione. How do you do it?"

"Its easy when I only have memories from one."

"Right." Ally said sullenly, then brightened. "You know what? You used to actaully *throw off* classes once in a while!"

"Don't tell me that."

"Why not?" Ally questioned.

Hermione shook her head. "It makes me sick."

## **Chapter 6**

Friday morning the Gryffindors had Herbology with Hufflepuff just before lunch and then Care of Magical Creatures with Ravenclaw after lunch.

“Right. Now I’ve given every other person a piece of Gloriteldna Grass. Your assignment today is to care for the Grass. Remember all the things we’ve studied about it!” Professor Sprout said and gestured first to the little squares of purple grass and then to the students’ books sitting off to the side. “Get with a partner, grab a grass and go!”

Hermione looked to a pair up with Ally but Pansy asked her first. Draco with Vinny, Greg with Theodore, Millicent with a Ravenclaw girl.... In the span of one second, all of her friends had partners.

A tall girl with almond shaped eyes and pretty black hair tapped Hermione’s shoulder. “Got a partner yet, Granger?” she asked.

Hermione shook her head. “Go with you?” she offered and was relieved to see someone who seemed to be the same.

Cho Chang smiled. “I was gonna ask you.”

As Hermione and Cho set to work to properly tend to their Gloriteldna Grass, Hermione was thankful Cho knew what she was doing. The Gloriteldna Grass was much like tentacles which always moved. One had to water them, feed them, trim off the dead pieces and be careful not to provoke the Grass or make it angry in any way. If it became angry, the Grass tentacles shot out tiny shocks of poison which gave a person an overly itchy and burn-like rash where it hit.

Once Hermione and Cho had lulled their Grass to sleep, they were free to talk. Draco and Vinny were not so lucky. As Vinny was reaching for the watering can, Draco was careful trimming a dead piece off. Vinny hit Draco’s arm sending the small greenhouse scissors into the middle of the Grass. It made a hissing sound, Vinny gasped and the two boys jumped back, unfortunately not in time. Draco’s hand got stung and the Grass spit blips of poison which hit Vinny in the face. Immediately the area where each was stung swelled and the two yelled in pain.

Professor Sprout shook her head irritably. "Again! I told you boys to *pay attention!*" she grumbled, shouted for everyone to continue and led the boys quickly away to see Madame Pomfrey.

"Ya know," Cho said thoughtfully. "I sure miss the good times."

"Whaddya mean?" Hermione said and glanced at the Grass which was still limp and asleep.

Cho smiled. "When we were in the D.A. together, of course!"

Hermione's eyes went wide as saucers. "Did - d-did - did.... y-you s-say the - the D-D.A.???"

Cho raised an eyebrow. "Uh, ya.....?"

"You y-you remember the D.A.!?!" Hermione could barely contain her excitement. Dumbledore had been wrong - not *everyone* had been changed! Cho remembered the D.A. The secret Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, performed under Harry's leadership, in the Room of Requirement, in a rebellion against the Ministry Professor Dolores Umbridge. They were building Dumbledore's Army in a revolt against Voldemort, Cho was part of it and she *remembered*.

Hermione wanted to rush into a conversation about her old life - oh it was going to feel so *good* to talk about it with someone who knew - really knew! But Cho started talking right then and Hermione didn't want to cut her off, although she was strongly fighting the urge to talk over her.

"Of course I remember the D.A.! We used to drive the Supervisors nuts!"

Hermione opened and closed her mouth. "Er, Supervisors?"

"Oh sure! With all the enchanted paper airplanes and then taking turns pulling pranks and leaving the room - "

"But, Cho, I thought - "

"Ya, the good times in the ol' D.A. - Detention Area. Such a fun place." Cho laughed aloud. "So easy to get in too! Just a strategic dung bomb - usually by McGonagall's - made her mental..." Cho laughed reminiscently again. "Oh, by the way, speaking of dung bombs. I've run out. You got any?"

"No." Hermione said quietly and turned away so Cho couldn't see the tears forming. She'd had a feeling deep down, that they were not talking about the same thing. It had been too good to be true. Her heart and hopes had skyrocketed at the possibility of someone knowing her world. But it only crashed harder when she was forced to further realize that she was truly alone.

---

"Ally, what's the 'Detention Area'?" Hermione asked as the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs headed back up the castle for lunch.

"Oh. It's this big room full of desks where they put kids who are " - she made quotations with her fingers - "'misbehaving'. Its such a joke, though. Most of the kids who get in there are the ones who merely ticked off McGonagall on a bad day." Ally shrugged. "All anyone ever does is mess around - you know, paper airplanes, the whole bit." she explained. "You were a regular."

Hermione ignored the last comment. "I see. And I bet Mr. Filch got it started, eh?" she smiled, thinking of the greasy caretaker and his greasy cat, Mrs. Norris, both always too eager to hand-out punishments.

"Mr. Filch? Of course not!" Ally laughed. "It was McGonagall who got it in!"

"But - "

"Ah, speak of the devil...." Ally pointed off down the grounds and saw Hermione could see Professor McGonagall yelling furiously at Professor Sprout.

"Wonder what that's all about." Hermione said, and didn't hear the voice behind her say, "Good morning, good morning....."

“Oh, and Filch.” Ally stopped walking and turned around.

Hermione did the same and she couldn't help it, but her jaw dropped completely open. There was Argus Filch. Well, at least she assumed it had to be Filch, because the rest of the people behind her were all students. But that didn't make it any less hard to believe.

His hair was short and clean, he was well-dressed, clean-shaven, young, and actually rather good-looking. In his arms he held a little white puff-ball, which was actually his kitten, named Miss Norris.

“Good morning everyone!” Filch greeted the students cheerfully as he moved through them. Several returned the greeting, including Ally. Hermione felt extremely stupid with her mouth hanging open and slowly, mechanically managed to close it.

“It's a lovely, sunny day!” he beamed up at the blue sky, then back at the students. “Hope you're all able to enjoy the weather today!” he grinned and Hermione saw nearly perfect teeth. She also noticed that Filch's eyes were the same color and shape, but these eyes were full of happiness, warmth and kindness, instead of loathing, disgust and coldness.

“See you later, sir!” Ally said and waved. He waved back, then fairly trotted down the grassy grounds to the edge of the Lake. There he set Miss Norris down, who immediately pounced playfully after a colorful butterfly fluttering past.

“That has got to be the most optimistic, cheerful man on earth.” Ally said and they began walking again.

“That was Filch.” Hermione said, more to herself than Ally.

Ally nodded. “Yes. Probably the nicest guy you'll ever meet.”

Hermione shook her head, a little dumbfounded and then the same old thoughts returned, She wanted her Harry and Ron, but she wanted Filch to stay the same. She sighed, and for the millionth time, wondered silently,

*‘Can't I have the best of both worlds?’*



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When Hermioen returned to the Common Room briefly to grab her books for Care of Magical Creatures, she found a large group gathered around the notice board.

“What is it?” she asked Pansy, who was closest.

“First Hogsmeade weekend!” she said excitedly. “Oh, I can’t wait! There’s one nearly every other weekend!”

Hermione smiled. “Glad to see that hasn’t changed.”

She headed out the portrait hole and then stopped. Weren’t the Hogsmeade trips not until later in the year? She started walking again. Not that she minded, of course. She stopped again. And weren’t there only a few trips? She started walking again. Again, she really didn’t mind.

She smiled. More Butterbeer for her.

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“So what’s Hagrid been teaching in this class?” Hermione asked. This was her first Care of Magical Creatures class since her wish, and it would be the first time she’d be able to talk to Hagrid too. She only worried that he was very different: perhaps, meaner, smaller, maybe. She hadn’t seen him at the Staff Table at all, and there never appeared to be any empty seats, either. She brushed it off quickly. She’d take this things into consideration later.

“Hagrid? Who’s he?” Ally said confusedly.

Hermione’s heart sunk like a rock into her stomach. ‘*Oh no.*’ No Hagrid? “Rubeus Hagrid? The games keeper? Huge fellow? You know, half-giant?” she knew she was describing her Hagrid, but maybe he still looked the same. Maybe he went by his first name, so that’s why Ally didn’t recognize it at first - she hoped.

Ally shook her head. “No, there’s no ‘Hagrid’ around here. Professor Grubbly-Planks is the teacher of Care of Magical Creatures, and she’s also the games keeper.”

Hermione sighed and refused to let herself cry. Maybe later, when she was alone.....

"Who was he?" Ally asked.

"Never mind." Hermione said sadly. "Just another part of my life that I can't get back."

She didn't mean to be so depressed all the time, she just didn't know how to deal with anything. She didn't want to be *happy* here, or she might never want to go back. She hadn't exactly *accepted* this as her new reality, either. And then at the same time, she just couldn't go on being so *miserable*. It was even more depressing to be miserable.

Once everyone had arrived, Professor Grubbly-Planks quickly explained that she needed to deal with an unruly animal near the Greenhouses, so everyone was to divide into pairs and find a Horklump in the Forest. Professor Sprout would supervise, and they most definitely should be able to find one, if they did their text reading.

"The Forest?!" Hermione exclaimed quietly, horrified. "B-but how can she - we're not allowed! Doesn't she know what's in the Forest?! Why do you think its FORBIDDEN!"

Ally stared at Hermione. "Uh..... okay??? Apparently in your other life!"

Hermione clenched her teeth. "Try to understand."

"Sorry." Ally cleared her throat slightly. "So what was YOUR Forest like, then?"

"Well, first of all, it was Forbidden. That's why they name dit the *Forbidden Forest* and - " she would've said more except that right then, Cedric Diggory came up to Ally and Hermione. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Uh, Hermione? Hi. I... uh, do you... well, if you're not already with A-ally, I mean...." he paused ever so briefly. "Ahem. Partners. You and me." he finally spat out, and looked partially relieved that he had done that much.

Hermione's cheeks went pink and for some reason butterflies suddenly sputtered around in her stomach. "Um, ok. Yes."

Ally raised an eyebrow and glanced from Hermione to Cedric, and back to Hermione. She took a step back towards Pansy and Draco, Vinny and Greg and Theodore, and tried not to smirk.

Hermione ignored the stares from her fellow Gryffindors and headed into the Forbid - er, the Forest, with Cedric.

"Do you know what a Horklump looks like?" Cedric smiled, trying to make small talk.

Hermione was quite sure could quite easily find a Horklump blindfolded, but she wanted to keep the small talk going. "Nope." she said, and smiled.

"Ne neither!" Cedric sounded relieved, but Hermione noticed that he seemed like he still wanted to ask her something. He was quiet and glancing off into the trees before he took a deep breath and said, "You, uh, you, uh.....going t-to Hogsmeade t-tomorrow?"

"Yes....." Hermione thought right away she knew where this was going, and she wanted to help him out. "I, er.... do you...." but she also found it was just as hard for herself to get it out as it was for him. "Do you..... um, wanna hang out?"

Cedric looked happy, but like he was holding back. "Er..... what about Ally and Draco and all them?" he asked, clearly thinking Hermione would say something like, 'Oh right, sorry then. Never mind.'

Hermione shrugged. "Well, I-I'm sure they'll have lots of *other* things to do.....I-I don't have to be with them the *whole* t-time....."

Cedric didn't seem to entirely accept her answer as full truth, but he seemed very happy to hear it nonetheless. "Ok. I'll 'hang out' with you. If its ok, I mean, w-with your friends, I mean." he said, and sucked in his breath. '*Idiot!*' he thought. '*She'll never go out with someone as thick as me!*'

Hermione looked straight into his gray-blue eyes. "I'd like that, Cedric." she smiled reassuringly. He grinned back, revealing pleasingly straight white teeth. For some reason, Hermione found her breath catch in her throat and her heart speed up. She ignored it immediately.

They were quiet for a moment, but it felt like a comfortable silence. Finally, Cedric commented, "I've seen you playing Quidditch."

"Really?" Hermione said, surprised, embarrassed and quite pleased all at the same time.

"Ya, and y-your really brilliant." Cedric half-smiled at her.

"T-thank you." Hermione felt her cheeks flush at the compliment and her stomach flipped. "Are you on a Quidditch team?" she asked, pulling the conversation away from herself.

"Ya. I'm Seeker and captain of the Ravenclaw team." he answered.

"You mean Hufflepuff." Hermione blurted.

Cedric raised an eyebrow. "Uh, no, because I'm not in Hufflepuff..... Why would I play for them?"

"No reason. Never mind. I was confused." Her cheeks were hot with embarrassment now. *'Moron! Why would I say that?!*' she thought. *'Remember where you are, Granger, and who you are talking to!'*

This time, the short silence was uncomfortable. Again, it was Cedric who broke it. "Anywhere in particular you wanted to meet tomorrow? In Hogsmeade?"

She could feel her cheeks still hot from her previous comment, but she ignored it. "I dunno.... you pick."

He shrugged. "..... how about.... Three Broomsticks?"

"Ok. Three Broomsticks it is." She glanced around and could only on other pair of students out in the Forest still looking for a Horklump.

“So how about we at least pretend like we’re looking for a Horklump?” she half-smiled.

Cedric laughed. “I’m on it.”

---

“Professor Snape, sir?” Hermione said tentatively.

It was after Potions, and Hermione had a list of ingredients in her pocket from the Wish Book for her wish reversal potion. So Snape wouldn’t be suspicious when she handed him the list and asked for the ingredients, Dumbledore had specially talked to Snape. He’d told Snape that Hermione was doing a special project for Dumbledore himself, and so she had permission to have what ever she asked for.

“Here’s the list, sir.” she produced it from her pocket and handed it to Snape. He scanned it and then went about gathering the ingredients.

“I have to say, Miss Granger,” Snape began as he set down the required number of Fillabean scales in a jar down on his desk. “I - as do the rest of the staff - greatly appreciate this sudden - er, practically overnight - change in attitude. It is as though you have become a new person. Might I ask why? What happened to cause this?”

Hermione’s jaw opened and closed slowly like a fish out of water. What was she supposed to say? Should she tell him?

“Well?” Snape politely prodded.

“I - with all due respect, Professor, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” she said, hoping he would just leave it at that, but quite sure he wouldn’t.

“Try me.” his words weren’t growly or challenging, just offering.

Hermione bit her lip then half-sighed. “Well sir, if my story sounds false, you may want to talk to Professor Dumbledore about it. He knows what happened.” she thought for a moment. “Actually, sir, maybe its best if you go speak directly to Professor Dumbledore, sir.” she finished and folded her hands in her lap.

"I see." Snape nodded and slowly went back to gathering the ingredients once again. "I shall then. Thank you." He put all the ingredients in their separate containers and then the containers into a cloth bag so Hermione could carry them easier.

"Thank you, sir." she nodded and turned to leave.

"We'll talk again, alright then, Hermione?" Snape smiled, and Hermione still felt shocked to see the kindness and warmth on his face and in his eyes.

"Yes sir."

---

"What was that all about?" Draco asked as soon as Hermione had entered the Common Room. They had said they'd wait, but Hermione waved at them to go. After her meeting with Snape, she'd stashed the Book, the bag of ingredients and an old cauldron in an old deserted classroom designated by Dumbledore. He put special charms on the room so no one but Hermione or himself would go in there.

"Oh, I just had a question about today's assignment, that's all." Hermione answered smoothly.

Draco eyed Hermione suspiciously.

"What?" she said, expecting him to not believe her and think that she was trying to ditch him, or ran to the library and wrote a letter to Krum or - well, that's what Ron would do.....

"Why'd you pair with Diggory today?" Draco suddenly asked, almost demanding.

Hermione put her hands on her hips and said defensively, "Why NOT? Am I not allowed to mingle with other people from other houses? Or are YOU the only people I can hang out with?!" she was speaking directly to Draco, who looked slightly taken aback by her response.

"You jealous or something, Draco?" Vinny teased and jabbed at Draco.

"I'm not! I just wanted to know why she didn't pair with *us*!" he Draco snapped, and waved Vinny's arm away.

"Of course. With you. You're just like Ron!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew that's exactly what she *did not* want to say. She clapped her hands over mouth and the others froze, not knowing what to do. Pansy gasped quietly.

Draco's face softened and he stood up. "No, I'm so sorry Hermione. I don't want you to compare me with that scum."

"Please, don't call him that." she whispered pleadingly. "I - I don't why I said that. I...." she never finished that sentence. Truth was, she had nothing to finish it with. She and her friends said nothing as she turned and headed to the Girls' Dormitory.

Hermione plopped down on her bed, dug out the coin and held it in her hand. Her fingers absentmindedly rubbed at the engravings. *'Why? Why do I keep thinking about him and bringing him up? Knowing that I can't be with him anymore just makes it all worse.'* she sighed and stared at the coin. *'Why do I have those funny feelings when I'm around Cedric? How can I fall for him when I'm in love with Ron?'* it was the first time she'd actually let herself finish the sentence, even in her mind.

"Love Ron....." she said aloud, but so quiet she barely heard herself. It sounded right. But how she could be getting the same strange feelings with Cedric? Still clutching the coin, she turned it over in her fingers.

"I love Ron. I want to do crazy things with him, and laugh with him, and do his homework for him...."

She sighed again and lay down. How was she supposed to be happy now? Whenever she felt odd around Cedric, she was going to feel guilty because she was in love with Ron. How could she just accept this new world, and leave *her* Ron and Harry and Ginny and Neville and Lavender and Parvati and Seamus and Dean behind?

It was so complicated, and the more she thought about it, the worse she felt. *'If only there was someway..... to have both.'*

Her only true wish now, was that it were possible.



## Chapter 7

Saturday dawned cool and drizzly.

Hermione walked through the Entrance Hall with the other Gryffindors, looking for Cedric at first, then remembering she was to meet him at the Three Broomsticks.

Filch stood at his usual post on Hogsmeade weekends, checking off the names of students with permission to go to Hogsmeade. He seemed as overly cheerful just as he had the other day.

“Good morning! Have a nice time! Hey, Smith! Bring me back a Butterbeer, eh?” he winked and nudged Zacharias Smith. “Gooooood morning! Good morning!”

He seemed to be making it a point to say good morning to every one who passed him with their permission forms outstretched. Hermione shook her head, still amazed at the wild turn in Filch.

Once in Hogsmeade, Hermione first headed to Honeydukes to pick up some sweet things: some Fizzing Whizbees, a small bag of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, some Droobles Best Blowing Gum (strawberry flavored) and one Sugar Quill for the heck of it. She then avoided the crowd at Zonko’s Joke Shop (all buying a healthy amount of Dung Bombs, Hiccup Sweets, Frog Spawn Soap and Nose-Biting Teacups, if she had to guess) and walked through the light rain to the Three Broomsticks.

As expected, the Three Broomsticks was already jammed full of students enjoying Butterbeer, Pumpkin Juice and other drinks. Hermione was slightly surprised to see everything looking quite the same – mirrors over the bar, all the same tables and booths – even Madame Rosmerta looked hardly different. But instead of her usual turquoise high-heels, she was wearing bright red flip-flops.

“Table, sweetie?” Madame Rosmerta said impatiently and suddenly, chewing a piece of gum rudely.

“Uh, ya.”

“Well, then go sit will ya?” Madame Rosmerta snapped and then made her gum crack loudly.

Hermione quickly went and sat in the nearest empty booth. ‘*What a grouch....*’ She thought.

A few minutes later, Ally, Draco, Greg, Vinny and Pansy came in from the rain, their pockets full and bulging with different objects of candy and joke merchandise. A package of Ice Mice fell from Vinny’s overstuffed pockets and began chattering on the floor. He quickly scooped them up, and received a glare from Madame Rosmerta.

“Oh, brilliant!” Draco said, and grinned. “She saved us a spot!” he pointed to Hermione and started to make his way over.

Hermione quickly waved her hands and mouthed, ‘No! No! No!’

Draco shook his head. “What? Why?”

The door behind them opened and Cedric let his wet hood down. He spotted Hermione immediately and smiled. Hermione looked past her friends at Cedric, smiled back and motioned him to come sit with her. Draco for some reason assumed he was motioning to him and started forward again. Ally grabbed him by the back of his shirt when Cedric squeezed past them, made his way over to Hermione and settled down on the opposite side of the booth. Greg and Vinny raised their eyebrows, clearly not sure how to react to this whole situation.

Draco shrugged. “Well, let’s go sit with them, then.”

This time it was Pansy who yanked on his collar. “Don’t you see? They’re on a *date!*” she hissed.

Ally grabbed Vinny’s arm. “Duh!”

The two girls steered the gaping boys to a booth that would hide Hermione and Cedric from their view. Hermione silently thanked them.

“Been to any stores yet?” Cedric asked.

“Just Honeydukes.” Hermione answered.

Cedric nodded. "Ya, I went to Honeydukes, then Zonko's. It was totally packed with students though, so I think I'll go back later."

Madame Rosmerta stalked up to their table and leaned on its edge. "Look kids, either order somethin' or git out!"

"Sorry - sorry, Madame." Cedric quickly apologized, then ordered. "Two Butterbeers."

Madame Rosmerta snapped her gum and rolled her eyes. "Of course, I should've known. She mumbled and went off to get the drinks.

"I hope its ok that I ordered for you." Cedric said. "I just really wanted to get her off our backs in a hurry." He half-smiled. "You know Rosmerta, after all."

Hermione half-smiled back, thinking, '*No, actually, not the one you know...*' but instead said, "Its perfectly alright. Its exactly what I wanted anyways."

A couple of minutes later, Madame Rosmerta returned with their Butterbeers. She plopped them down roughly on the table, causing a little bit to spill over.

"Thank you." Cedric and Hermione said together politely.

Madame Rosmerta merely grunted and headed off to "serve" the next group of students who had the gall not to have ordered yet.

"So, how was your summer, Cedric?" Hermione asked and took a sip of her Butterbeer. It made her feel tingly and warm inside, just like it always did. Thank goodness it hadn't changed.

Cedric wiped up the little slop of Butterbeer on the table as he spoke, before setting the used napkin aside. He shrugged. "Positively uneventful, as usual. You?"

"Oh, my family and I took a small holiday to France again. Its so lovely! It was much shorter than last time, though, but I'm not complaining. It was still beautiful." She paused to have another sip.

“After we came back, I got to go to the Weasley’s for a weekend or two. It was really fun.” She answered without thinking, because that was what she had done in the summer.

Cedric looked at her strangely. “Sorry, did you just say you went to the *Weasley’s* for a weekend?”

And then Hermione remembered hard what she *should* have said. “Uh, no. I said – uh – Minstrel’s. Ally’s.” she said quickly, knowing how unconvincing she sounded.

“I coulda sworn you said Weasley’s.....”

“Slip of the tongue!” she swallowed a gulp of Butterbeer that was just enough too big to go down in a painful ball of liquid.

“Aw, no matter.” He shrugged. He paused and drank a little. “Say, Hermione?”

“Hm?” she swallowed less of her drink this time, but still a little uneasy about her slip in the conversation.

“Would it be alright if.....um, well..... alright.” He took a deep breath. “I need a tutor for Care of Magical Creatures – I’m not doing well at all – never have – even though its just the beginning of the year. And, well, Professor Sprout thought you would be the best choice because in the last week your grades have risen from near bottom of the class to landslide top of the class. And she said that she talked to some of the staff and they see that in every class. They figure your probably good at everything – Grubbly-Planks said, anyways...” he was talking faster and faster as his face became redder, and Hermione found it hard not to laugh. “What I’m trying to say is that I need a tutor for Care of Magical Creatures because I’m near failing and kind of always have been and now – no, I already said that, didn’t I?”

Hermione giggled out loud and Cedric finally stopped rambling for a minute, his cheeks thoroughly pink, and she could tell he was thoroughly embarrassed. “I can help you, Cedric. It’ll be no problem at all.” She smiled reassuringly.

His cheeks began to turn back to normal color. "Really?" he cleared his throat and looked deeply relieved. "Thanks a lot. I mean it, I really appreciate this."

"What day and what time did you want to do this on?" she asked.

"Uh, I dunno. Probably just whenever we can. I mean, in between homework and Quidditch, so..." Cedric coked his head slightly.

Hermione nodded. "You just tell me when and where."

Cedric smiled and nodded also. "I shall."

Hermione smiled back and finished the last of her Butterbeer. He was really handsome, really. He had just the right amount of muscles, a very nice smile, mysterious gray-blue eyes, attractive curly chestnut hair.....

She had a strong feeling she would be seeing more of Cedric Diggory.

---

Sunday came and went, quite uneventfully.

Hermione ate, had Quidditch practice (which was called off after only an hour and half because of a thunderstorm), finished her homework, read some books she had never read before in the library, walked across the grounds when the storm had subsided, then resumed Quidditch practice, and later in the evening, went to bed.

---

Monday, however, was quite eventful.

Hermione sat quietly eating her breakfast as the mail owls swooped in. She never expected anything, except maybe the newspaper. Sure enough, an owl holding a weekly issue of *The Daily Prophet* stopped down in front of her. She vaguely remembered getting the *Prophet* last week, but she'd been far too upset to even glance at it.

She paid the owl, rolled the *Prophet* up and stuffed it in her bag. She'd read it later. That's when another owl plopped down in front of her, and when it held out its leg, there was no mistaking who too.

“Whose that from?” Ally asked immediately.

“I don’t know... I never get mail.....” What Hermione didn’t say was, ‘*Who is there to send me letters?*’ She untied the letter, unrolled it and silently began to read.

*“Dear Hermione,*

*This is Sirius Black. Don’t freak out, it really is me. I’m alive.”*

Hermione nearly screamed aloud in pure shock. Instead she clapped her hand over her mouth and read on.

*“On minute I was in the Department of Mysteries dueling with Bellatrix, and the next I found myself in a very clean, very deserted, very Kreacher-less 12 Grimmauld Place. I quickly found that everything was very strange and backwards. Ludo Bagman is the Minister! I’m in hiding, but not because I’m accused of murder. Brace yourself because this is the weirdest thing yet: I’m the lead singer of the Weird Sisters! I know, extremely strange. I play lead guitar as well, and all the other members are the same, except for Kirley McCormack Duke, whose place I assume have taken. I can’t go anywhere in the wizarding world without getting mauled by over-obsessive fans. The popularity is practically unbearable. I don’t know which is worse!”*

Hermione laughed aloud. The Weird Sisters?

*Anyways, when I found myself alive and well, and in Grimmauld Place, I was, needless to say, extremely confused. I prayed that nothing had happened to Dumbledore, and thankfully, he seems completely the same, and obviously surprised to hear from me. He explained that you had made a wish that you didn’t mean, turning the world backwards, essentially. He asked me not to contact you for week or so, because you were hysterical and depressed, and me saying, ‘Hey, I’m alive!’ would have been too much. “*

Hermione smiled. He’d got that right.

*“I wanted to let you know that I was here, though, and you can talk to me anytime you want. I have all my memories from before, and Dumbledore said he does, and so do you. We’re the only three who*

*are 'correct' in this world right now, so if anything happens, if you need help with anything, you can talk to us, ok?*

*Oh, and by the way, we don't have to worry about coding our letters. There's no followers of Voldemort, no Death Eaters, no Umbridge to intercept and destroy.*

*Keep your chin up, Hermione. Live like this until you can reverse it and get back to where we belong.*

*Sincerely,*

Sirius “

Right at that moment, Hermione was happier than she'd been in a very, very long time. She read the letter a second time, tears beginning to whirl before her. She could talk to him. He would remember everything. It was amazing! She could barely contain herself, and her friends noticed.

“Whose is it from?” Ally asked.

“Yes, who IS it from?” Pansy repeated eagerly.

The three boys and two girls all leaned forward, each with a very interested look on their faces. They had been studying her while she read the letter, and now just had to know who had written to cause them.

But Hermione was far too excited to just tell them. “An old friend.” She answered quickly and jumped out of her chair. “See you guys in Transfiguration!” she grabbed her stuff and took off at a near run out of the Great Hall, ignoring the disappointed, curious and confused faces of her friends behind.

At that moment, absolutely nothing – McGonagall leering or yelling, Harry and Ron calling her names and pointing – nothing could tear or dampen her mood. She smiled so wide she thought maybe her face would break.

Sirius was alive!

## Chapter 8

When Hermione arrived in Transfiguration, she found that McGonagall had moved her to the very front row, with no other students on either side of her. McGonagall then handed out an extensive pop quiz, all the while, warily and angrily eyeing Hermione.

Hermione didn't mind. It seemed the Professor still really believed her to be cheating. Hermione knew she didn't cheat, and that was enough. She kept her eyes on her paper at all times, not even daring to look up or around for fear McGonagall would dock her points anyways.

When class was over, McGonagall swished around in a huff collecting everyone's papers – done or not. She made a very audible, "HMPH!" when she came and snatched up Hermione's paper, yanking it off her desk and crunching it slightly.

Hermione merely smiled and gathered her things.

"So how was that for you?" Hermione asked Ally and Pansy as they headed to Potions. Thankfully, the two didn't further press about her mysterious letter that morning. It wasn't that Hermione *didn't* want to tell them, it was mostly just that she really didn't know how they would react and she wanted to talk to Sirius a little before she told her friends about him.

"Brutal!" Pansy shook her head, her face grim. "I just know I failed!"

"It was *really* tough. I don't know why she does that. Just pop something like that." Ally shook her head also.

Hermione really hadn't thought it had been that difficult. She'd finished in time, and had written an answer for every question except one ("*Describe the changes a Mumblolo can go through*" – Hermione was quite sure that one was made up, as she had never in her life heard of or read about anything titled a Mumblolo). Still, she didn't exactly want to say it was easy, so instead she murmured,

"Ya."



---

“Hermione? A moment, if you please.” Snape said politely.

Hermione nodded and her friends stared after her, wondering what it could be this time.

“It’s just about today’s lesson, now run along. She’ll catch up.” Snape waved his hand at the other Gryffindors. “And won’t you please shut the door behind you? Thank you very much.”

The others reluctantly retreated to the hallway, closing the door behind them as instructed.

Snape settled behind his desk and raised one eyebrow quite high on his face. “Wish Reversal?”

Hermione sighed and sat down in a chair across from the desk. “Yes sir.”

“May I ask what was your wish? It wasn’t to be a good student, now, was it? Because if it was, myself – and the rest of the staff, I’m sure – would like things to stay as they are.....”

“No sir. I’ve always been a good student. I had an entirely different life – from the way you and everyone else remembers it, at least. In that life, I found a wishing coin.” Hermione explained. “I got really angry with my friends – who were Ron and Harry – and accidentally wished for everything to be different. Now it is, and I only want it to be back to the way it was before, as I remember them.”

Snape slowly nodded, his fingers steepled in front of his chin as his elbows rested on the desk. “That’s what Professor Dumbledore told me, I just wanted to hear it from you.”

Hermione was quiet.

“Hermione, I must warn you that there are several complications involved in Wish Reversal potions. Anything ranging from too little of an ingredient to too long of a brewing time. These things can result in only half of the wish being reversed – which can be quite catastrophic, as you can imagine – or – “

"I know sir." Hermione cut him off. "I've been reading and studying the book Professor Dumbledore gave me. I know all about the complications."

"I see." He paused briefly. "Then I assume you also know that – "

"I have to do the potion completely on my own, with no other help whatsoever, or the magical properties of certain ingredients could be distorted because I am the one who has to drink the potion." Hermione finished and smiled.

Snape smiled, looking impressed. "My, you do do your homework – now – don't you?"

Hermione smiled back. She could very easily get used to this Snape.

"Alright then. It seems this discussion has turned out to be rather pointless, then. What class do you have next?"

"Oh no!" Hermione slapped her forehead. "Transfiguration again! Professor McGonagall will be furious!" she immediately began rushing to grab her Potions things, still lying open on her desk.

"Hermione! Hermione." Snape held up his hands up to calm her mild panic. "I shall write a note excusing you and your friends." He quickly began scribbling it up and Hermione stopped jamming her things together. "Just remember, you five were staying after class to help me clean up." He handed her the note, and saw the questioning look on her face. "Your friends are right outside, I'm sure, so that is why I am excusing them also." He smiled genuinely. "If Professor McGonagall has a problem with this, I've noted for her to come see me about it."

Hermione gladly pocketed the note. "Thank you so much, Professor Snape." Hermione began speed walking towards the door but was struck with a thought. She turned around to face Snape again. "Er, Professor?"

"Yes?"

“Whatever happened to Fred and George Weasley?” she asked, half-smiling a little mischievously.

Snape was about to ask her why she didn’t know herself – why was she asking – but didn’t bother as their conversation moments earlier flitted through his mind. “Two of the most serious boys I’ve met in my life. They dropped out in their seventh year, extremely brilliant – I swear they never smiled once. They are extremely successful business lawyers. Opened their own firm and are thriving. “

Hermione held in her laughter at the image of Fred and George being serious. She started towards the door a second time, but stopped again. “A-and Percy Weasley?”

Snape sighed. “Don’t tell anyone this, but – “ He glanced around as if to make sure no one listening, then lowered his voice. “Honestly one of the *dullest* students I’ve ever had to teach. He’s a janitor for the Ministry of Magic, and in my opinion he’s lucky to even be doing *that* job.” Snape smirked.

Hermione bit her bottom lip to keep from completely losing control of the laughter filling her up.

Snape grinned, knowing she was trying not to laugh. “You’d better get to class.”

She nodded quickly, began towards the door once again, and this time did not stop. She waved over shoulder, “Thank you, Professor, again! Bye!”

---

Hermione scooped a pile of mashed potatoes onto her already full plate. She was very hungry, and thankfully suppertime had finally come. Right away she started shoveling in the good, hot food. She briefly thought about her day, and how it had been one of the best days so far, despite McGonagall’s pop quiz and delayed rage at their being late. She had read the note, gone a little red in the face, taken five points from Gryffindor anyways, and then given the entire class a mountain of homework.

“Oy! Hermione!” someone called.

Hermione quickly took a drink, swallowed and turned around to see who had addressed her.

Cedric weaved through the people finally filing into the Great Hall for supper before he reached the Gryffindor table.

“Hey.” He panted ever so slightly.

“Hey.” She smiled, feeling her cheeks go a little pinker.

“About those study sessions... I was thinking tomorrow after supper, in the library. Say... 7:00? Does that sound alright to you?”

Hermione thought for a moment. No Quidditch..... homework she could do a different time... “Yes, that sounds good. I’ll see you then.” She answered.

“Alright then, good. See you later!” Cedric grinned and then made his way to the Ravenclaw table.

Hermione ignored stares from her friends. Honestly, couldn’t they leave her alone? She felt instantly guilty at the thought, however, and took it back in her mind. *‘They’re just being my friends.’*

She turned to Greg and Vinny and smiled. “So, when’s our next Quidditch practice?”

---

Later that night, shortly before bedtime, Hermione decided to send a letter back to Sirius. She sat on her bed in the dorm, with parchment, quill, ink and flashlight, as she didn’t feel like being in the well-lit Common Room at that moment.

She thought for a moment – what to say? Then, slowly, she began her letter.

*“Dear Sirius,*

I got your letter, and I’m sure you can imagine just how shocked I was! I nearly fainted (not quite, but close). I am extremely happy to hear from you, for several different reasons.”

She didn't exactly want to write those reasons down, however, because she did not like the sounds of them. *'I'm glad you're not dead, I'm glad you're here....'* No, just didn't sound right. Hermione continued.

*"Things are 180 degrees different. I'm still in Gryffindor, but Harry and Ron are NOT, and are NOT my friends. It is very hard to see them as I know Draco Malfoy, and Malfoy as I know Harry. To explain: Harry and Ron call me things like filth and other unmentionable names, whereas Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson and the lot are my best friends! According to Malfoy, I was dating him! I can't even imagine.*

*Here is another interesting bit. I'm a Chaser for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. It's a laugh, because I've never played Quidditch before, so I'm basically learning it all over again. Thankfully I seem to be a fast learner. Cedric tells me I was – am – brilliant. That's another thing: Cedric Diggory is alive (because there's no Voldemort, obviously) and we're becoming quite close.*

Professor Snape is about the nicest guy you'll ever meet – other than Filch, that is. You ought to meet them. It is extremely hard to believe that they could be nice and cheerful unless you see it first hand. But Professor McGonagall is the worst. She's downright horrible, and I recommend staying away from her!"

She wanted to add in there that she was trying to reverse the spell, but for reason felt she shouldn't mention that maybe just yet.

*"I hope you are doing well. Maybe you and I could talk sometime? Either by Floo, Hogsmeade... etc.... Anyways, talk to you soon.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione"*

She was just about to fold it up, but decided to add just one more thing.

"P.S. I talked to Snape today and found out that Fred and George Weasley are very, very serious business men, and Percy is a dull-minded janitor for the Ministry!"

She briefly read over her letter. She didn't like how some parts of it sounded, but she didn't care to fix it either. At the moment she had put the letter in an envelope and addressed it, Ally entered the dorm.

"Hey, can I borrow your owl?" Hermione asked.

"Sure." Ally nodded and retrieved her salt-n-pepper owl, Jesabelle.

Hermione jotted a note that she was using Ally Minstrel's owl, then tied the letter to the owl's leg. "Sirius Black." She said quietly, and released it out the window.

She turned around and Ally laughed slightly. "Think he's going to write back?"

Hermione knit her eyebrows. "Yes..... why wouldn't he?"

"Oh, c'mon Hermione. I doubt somebody like him answers all his fan-mail."

Hermione shook her head. "What? I don't know what you're talking about."

Ally made a skeptical grunting sound.

"What do you mean, 'fan-mail'?"

Ally put a hand on her hip. "Sirius Black? Duh!"

Hermione chuckled. "Oh, no. You got it wrong. I know him personally."

Ally laughed out loud. "Ya, you and every other wishes too."

Hermione shook her head a little. "No, really, I do!"

"Suuuure. Me too."

"I do!" Hermione threw her hands up.

"Then when he writes back, you can prove it to me." Ally flipped her hair slightly, and crawled onto her bed.

Hermione shook her head again. "Fine then, I will. You'll see."

"Whatever you say."

## Chapter 9

### **Chapter 9**

Tuesday morning came and went.

Hermione concentrated on classes, including Charms, where she had to concentrate extra hard on the task at hand (color changing charms on rocks) and not on Cedric making her laugh by turning his nose different colors.

By the end of Charms, she had managed to color her rock correctly, but her eyes were watering from laughter and she couldn't *wait* until her and Cedric's study session, tonight!

The big damper on her day occurred before double Charms, which also happened to be last class of the day. Graham Pritchard caught Hermione in the hall.

"Oy! We have to move Quiddich practice to tonight!" he said.

"What? Oh no, Graham! I have a... study g-group!" Hermione protested, quite sure two people did not make it a study *group*, but also knowing she had no other explanation to give. "What was wrong with tomorrow night?"

Graham grit his teeth. "Slytherin has it 'booked' apparently. McGonagall wrote them a ruddy permission note, and because – " his face was turning red with anger and frustration " – we didn't have one from Snape *first*, they get it." He punched the wall. "I hate Slytherin! We practice every Wednesday after class – always have – and now they come in here and take it away from us!"

Hermione was surprised by the magnitude of his anger – it was only one night – but she understood his frustration.

"I hate them!" Graham repeated, for no apparent reason.

Hermione sighed. "Join the club. Alright then. Thanks for telling me. I'll be there."



Graham's face began returning to its normal color. He sighed as well, the anger seeming to drain him a little. "Pass it on."

Hermione slowly nodded, said goodbye and headed to Charms with her head hanging. She'd really been looking forward to her study session with Cedric. She sighed and thought they could move the session to tomorrow night, where her Quidditch practice was *supposed* to be, and decided to ask Cedric about it. That helped her feel a little better, but not by much.

There was a tap on her shoulder.

"You ok?" Cedric asked, his face full of concern as he fell into step beside her.

Hermione was about to nod, but stopped and shook her head instead. "Nope."

"Care to talk about it?" Cedric offered politely.

"Actually, you're just the person I need to talk to."

"Uh oh, what'd I do?"

Hermione half-smiled. "Nothing. Its just – " And she explained what Graham had told her.

"Oh. That stinks." Cedric nodded understandingly.

"Tomorrow alright then?" Hermione suggested hopefully.

Cedric shook his head. "Can't. I have a detention with Flitwick." He smiled ruefully.

"For making you nose blue and orange and purple?" Hermione giggled.

Cedric grinned. "You betcha. It was hard to hear him yelling at me after class, when I could tell my nose was still purple."

They both laughed.

“Ok, how about Thursday, then?” Hermione tried again.

Cedric shook his head again. “Ravenclaw Quidditch practice. Friday?”

Hermione chuckled. “Then I have Quidditch!”

“Twice a week?”

Hermione shrugged. “Graham’s obsessive. He’s like Oliver Wood.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

Cedric flopped his arm to his side. “Ok, then! When you’re free after *that*, then let me know and maybe I can pencil you in!”

Hermione laughed. “Ya, really!”

From there the two walked and talked comfortably all the way to Charms, where a six-foot booming and grumpy Flitwick so “kindly reminded” Cedric of his detention tomorrow after class. Flitwick handed out their homework: an essay outlining what a color changing charm is, how does it work, what are its uses, when should be used, etc.

It was quite obvious why they were getting this specific essay, and it was hard to not laugh when Cedric caught Hermione’s eye and made a stupid face indicating himself having a purple nose. They narrowly missed getting points docked as they smirked and snorted during a quiz, and Flitwick looked up.

Hermione briefly considered not doing to essay, or saying something out loud during the quiz, knowing she would be given a detention so she could be with Cedric. There were no guarantees that she would get a Wednesday detention the same time as Cedric though, and she was rather appalled at herself for even thinking of such a thing. She quickly dismissed the thought and continued on with the quiz.

---

That evening, after Quidditch practice, as Hermione was working on her homework, Pansy quietly approached her with tears in her eyes. She came over, sat down on the chair, and Hermione barely noticed until Pansy made one of those choking sobbing noises one makes when you have been crying and are now trying to hold it in.

Hermione dropped her quill. "Pansy! What's wrong?"

"You!" Pansy blurted and covered her mouth with her hand.

Hermione quirked her eyebrows and shook her head slightly. "What? Me? Pansy, I don't understand."

Pansy nodded her head vigorously, stopped, made a small gasp-like noise, and then in an emotional voice she said, "Y-you never talk to us anymore! You n-never hang out with us, or s-sit with us except at meals... Us! Draco, Ally, Crabbe, Goyle, Vinny, me – you used to hang out – we'd d-do *everything* together!" she paused and gasped some air before tearfully continuing. "We'd tell each other everything – we were *inseperable*! But now... now its all changed! You're like a completely different person! You're either by your-self, or with... Cedric Diggory!"

Hermione sighed, quite unsure of how to handle the situation. "I'm sorry I'm different to you, Pansy. But this is the way *I*'ve always been. I used to have other friends, who are now my enemies. You guys used to be my enemies, and now you're my friends. I accept that I'm here, but I can't just erase all the memories I have from before. Do you understand that?"

"But you always say that! That – that you can't forget... Try! Please try! I miss my friend!" Pansy pleaded, almost desperately.

Hermione was ever so slightly annoyed, but mostly she was sympathetic. How would she feel in Pansy's shoes? "Its just been so hard. I will try to be with you guys more, alright? I'll try."

Pansy's red tear-stained face broken into a watery grin. "Thank you Hermione."

“Thank you for telling me. I didn’t realize – “ Hermione was cut off as Pansy suddenly lunged out of her seat and caught Hermione in a back-crushing hug. Hermione awkwardly patted Pansy’s back until Pansy let go and headed out of the Common Room without another word.

Hermione sat back in her chair, rather surprised by the hug, and a little sore. It was nearly a full minute before Hermione picked up her quill and continued on her work.

---

Wednesday dawned cold, wet and very windy.

Hermione was thankful she had no Herbology or Care of Magical Creatures classes to attend, and was even more thankful that the Gryffindor had been last night instead. It was greatly pleasing to imagine the Slytherins on their brooms in such icy wet air.

As she ate her breakfast and the morning post came in, Hermione looked up immediately, hoping for a reply from Sirius. A small gray owl landed roughly in front her, nearly toppling her glass and spilling all her orange juice. It wasn’t Sirius, but she was pleasantly surprised anyway.

*“Hey Hermione!*

*I’ve got great news and bad news. The great news is that Grubbly-Planks told Flitwick I needed to study with my ‘study group’ and so she got him to move my detention. So we can study tonight, if its ok with you. The bad news is that I have to miss Quidditch practice tomorrow, because there where Grubbly-planks and Flitwick decided to move it. They figure it’ll be more of a punishment if I’m missing something extra-curricular.*

*Anyways, I’ll talk to you in Charms.*

*From, C.D.”*

Hermione smiled. She wasn’t exactly sure why he didn’t just come from the Ravenclaw table to the Gryffindor table, but it didn’t matter. It was cute to get the note from him.

She snatched up a napkin and her quill from her book bag and scrawled a quick note. Before she'd finished, the owl was already holding out its leg.

*"Sure thing. Tonight, 7 p.m.? Library. See you then!"*

She attached it to the owl and sent it back over Cedric.

Cedric received the owl immediately, read the quick, then gave her the thumbs up. She smiled and nodded, then returned to her fast soggy-ing cereal.

## **Chapter 10**

Hermione sat in the library, about five minutes to seven, patiently waiting for Cedric to show up for their study session. She sat with her legs crossed neatly under the table and her hands folded across the papers and books spread out in front of her. She kept trying to scan the books she had brought with her, but every time there was movement near the library door, she found herself looking up.

She didn't have to wait long, and he arrived, nearly right on time, just at four after seven.

"I'm not late, am I?" Cedric asked, smiling widely as he plopped down into the chair across the table from Hermione. He dumped his bag onto the chair on his left.

Hermione's heart beat faster and she didn't know why. Maybe it was the way he smiling... "Nope! I was a little early." she tried to smile as nicely back.

"Ah, I see."

They were quiet for a short moment before Hermione said, "Do you have *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, by Newt Scamander with you?"

Cedric nodded. "Sure do." he produced it from his bag and tossed it lightly onto the table.

"So what - or where - er, ok." Hermione's cheeks tinted a little more pink. "Let's try that again." she was oddly distracted by that smile... she almost wanted to ask him not to, but she rather liked it... "What are you having trouble with exactly?" She finally managed to ask, her hands still resting on top of her own copy of the book.

Finally Cedric seemed to tone down on his amazing smile. "Mostly just putting a name to descriptions. I can tell what it is by seeing it, but for some reason its not translating into words." He shrugged. "I have no clue why. Maybe I'm a visual person." he raked his fingers through his thick curly hair.

Hermione forced herself to look away from him. "Right. Well that's easy enough to fix." She flipped open her book and turned to the page with the heading, '*An A-Z of Fantastic Beasts*'. "Shall we start at the beginning, then?" she chanced a glance at Cedric.

Cedric had dropped his own eyes to his own book. "Sure..." he reluctantly turned to the same page she was on.

"We'll do the A's and B's today, ok? I'll write down the ones we go over today, and then next time you'll get a small quiz." Cedric let out a mock choked gasping noise. Hermione half-smiled but otherwise ignore him. "That way you'll be forced to study them."

"A quiz? Are you training to be a Professor or something?"

Hermione giggled. "It'll help you remember! Honest!"

Cedric sighed fakely and over dramatically. "Right then. I guess I *gotta* pay attention. No more staring at you." He flashed her that smile.

The color of Hermione's cheeks moved up several more notches of tints and she quickly cleared her throat and focused her eyes and thoughts on the text before her. "Acromantula..."

From there they went through all the A's and headed into the B's: Acromantula, Ashwinder, Augurey, and Basillisk. When they began the Basillisk, Hermione smiled reminiscently and began talking without thinking.

"Remember, when I was in second year, how the Chamber of Secrets was opened? That was scary times... I was petrified by the Basillisk. I'd just figured out that seeing its reflection petrifies you - because we knew looking directly at it killed you - " She was talking fast, and hardly looking at Cedric, lost in her memories. She barely even heard him speaking to her.

"What? Chamber of Secrets? A Basillisk in the school? Never! What - " He tried to stem her flow of words with his questions, but Hermione stupidly and forgetfully talked over him.

"Yes, I remember it was Mrs. Norris first, then Colin Creevey - annoying little first year, he was - and Nearly Headless Nick - "

"Nearly - what? Who!"

" - and then Justin Flinch-Fletchley. Of course everyone thought poor Harry did it because he was a Parseltongue. And after that awful business with Ginny and Riddle in the Chamber - well, Ron and Harry told me all about it after of course - "

Finally Cedric put his hands up almost in her face. "What - are - you - talking - about?" he spoke slowly and with great emphasis on every word.

Hermione's cheeks, though a shade of darker pink earlier now flushed to a brilliant red that rivaled Ron's ears when he was uncomfortable. She had completely forgotten who she was talking to and hadn't heard a word Cedric had said until that moment. She felt like a fool and had no idea how to explain herself.

Cedric stared at her expectantly and lowered his hands, having finally gotten her attention. She said nothing for a moment, trying desperately to think of something to say to him - something, *anything* to explain her behavior.

"Well?" he said, slightly irritated at her for talking so fast so that he only caught parts of it, and very confused at to what she was indeed talking about. He crossed his arms from his chest.

Hermione swallowed and then cleared her throat. Ignore it? "Well... ahem... yes. Well... there's an explanation for this... I..." Not meeting his eyes, and still panickedly searching for something to say to him, her eyes fell on the book and papers before her. Her mind was as blank as spare parchment.

Cedric sighed, and uncrossed his arms. "Look, if you don't want to talk about it - "

"I don't." she said, much quicker and harsher than she'd intended. He looked slightly startled. "I mean - I'm sorry. I-I... someday. Someday I'll tell you."



In no mood to further pry, Cedric sighed lightly again and pulled his book toward him. "I'll hold you to that." he mumbled.

Hermione let her breath out slightly, praying her cheeks would return to their normal color faster than they were, and also pulled her own book towards herself more. "Billywig... yes, interesting creature..."

After that, the pair moved through the rest of the B's: Billywig, Bowtruckle, and Bundimun. As they discussed the Bowtruckle, Hermione vividly remembered just last year, their fifth, when Professor Grubbly-Plank had had them study and sketch the Bowtruckle. She smiled smally, but forced her mouth to stay sealed shut against anymore memories that might spill over.

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Thursday morning came, and with it came very similar weather to that of Wednesday: cold, wet and very windy. Hermione was heading down to the Great Hall with Ally and Pansy at her side, and was relating the events of the previous night's study session.

"But I just rambled on like a mindless *idiot* about things that happened in my other life." She lightly smacked her forehead. "Of course he knew *nothing* about what I was talking about. And all I could do was promise him that 'someday' I would tell him what I was talking about."

Pansy muffled a giggle and said, "I'm sure it wasn't *that* bad!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and the three girls entered the Great Hall. "Oh yes it was. Before that I couldn't take my eyes of f his ruddy smile and then after that y face was as red as tomato. I think he probably expected me to run my mouth off again at any second."

Both Ally and Pansy giggled this time. "Other than that, it sounds nice." Ally said.

"Yes, *real* nice." Hermione rolled her eyes again, but chuckled a little in spite of herself.

The three girls settled at the table together and began dishing themselves up. After a few minutes of comfortable silence as the girls ate their fill, it became apparent Pansy wanted to talk about

something again. She kept shooting Hermione looks as if waiting for the right moment, but didn't actually say anything until Hermione drained the last of her orange juice.

Pansy cocked her head to one side as Ally dished herself a touch more eggs and said, "Hermione, can you tell us about - you know - your 'other life'?" She grabbed the last two pieces of bacon and jammed them into her mouth as she waited for Hermione's reply.

Hermione was a bit startled by the request and actually wasn't entirely sure how to answer. It was easily one of the strangest question she'd ever been asked, but at the same time, she was surprised the others had not asked sooner. "Well, what exactly do you want to know about?"

Pansy sort of shrugged and sipped her apple juice. "I don't know..."

"What was Cedric like?" Ally piped up.

"He was - " Hermione stopped. '*He was dead.*' she thought grimly.

"Hermione...?" Ally leaned forward and looked at Hermione with concern. "Are you alright? You suddenly look a little pale..."

Hermione didn't answer for a moment. Her eyes dropped to her dirty plate. The scene of the Last Task in the Triwizard Tournament had just popped into her mind like a movie on pause waiting to be played. She's cheered as Harry and Cedric had grabbed the trophy together and disappeared... then when Harry had returned, looking beaten and bloody, he'd been clutching an unnaturally limp Cedric...

"Hermione?" Pansy looked a little wide-eyed as Hermione raised her eyes to survey her friends. "You don't have to tell us..."

"No, its ok." Hermione managed to say. She swallowed. They'd ask. She'd tell. "He was dead." she whispered it so quietly that the girls had to lean in close. Pansy sitting closest to Hermione on her left, then Ally beside Pansy, leaning across her to hear properly. Hermione had whispered it so quietly, in fact, she was hardly sure herself whether she had said it or thought it.

"Pardon?" Ally said. Neither girl had heard what Hermione had said.

A couple of tears suddenly threatened to break lose as they lightly stung her eyes, but she blinked them back. Why was she upset? She hadn't even known him at the time! "He was..." she started and the other two girls leaned closer still. "...dead."

Both girls recoiled and gasped loudly, Pansy clapping both hands over her mouth, wearing a truly horrified expression. Ally looked at the remaining food on her plate and pushed it away. Hermione clenched her jaw.

"Oh... I'm so sorry! I didn't - I wouldn't have asked - I shouldn't have - I..." Pansy apologized in a stumble of rapid words.

"Hermione..." Ally stared at her sympathetically. "You don't have to say anymore if you don't want to."

For an instant, Hermione considered not saying anything. But then she felt like she might feel better if someone else knew other things that she knew, even if it was just by her telling them. She started to sigh, but didn't. "I don't mind."

Pansy glanced at Ally and still looked a little horror stricken at the prospect of Cedric being dead in Hermione's other life. "Is it... if its ok... if I ask... you know..." Ally seemed to search her words in order to word her question in the best way possible, but was not finding the best way. "...um... just... how? How did he... you know..."

Hermione nodded slightly, understanding what she was trying to ask. "How did he die?"

Ally nodded fully.

Pansy cut in before Hermione answered. "You don't have to - if its too painful or weird or anything - you don't have to say anything at all." Ally quickly agreed.

"No, its alright." She took a deep breath. "Ally, do you remember that evil wizard I told you about before?"

“Uh, I think so. What was his name again? Volly... Voladee... Voledean...”

Hermione quickly stopped her. “Yes, that’s the one. V-voldemort.” It was oddly unnerving to hear Ally butcher the name, and especially odd for neither Pansy nor Ally to flinch when Hermione actually said the name.

Pansy shivered slightly and rubbed her arm. “Pretty creepy name.”

“Yes, well,” Hermione nodded. “This wizard was way beyond creepy. He was the most evil wizard alive, and he had many followers, called Death Eaters. They killed many, many people: good wizards, wizards who opposed him or his followers, wizards who weren’t *pure blood*. And sometimes if they weren’t killed, they were tortured into madness using one of the Unforgivable Curses. Poor Neville Longbottom’s parents were tortured into madness by a woman named Bellatrix Lestrange. Neville has to live with his grandma because his parents live at St. Mungo’s.”

Pansy opened her mouth to protest about Neville’s parents. “No, they’re not, they’re - “

“My world, remember?” Hermione said simply, holding her hand up.

“Oh right.” Pansy said then added, “And its St. *Mango*’s.”

“Keep going.” Ally prompted, as both her and Hermione waved Pansy’s last comment off.

“Well,” Hermione continued. “After Harry’s parents, James and Lily Potter had stood up to Voldemort and his followers, he became a little determined to do away with them. Part of it too, I think, was that they were so loyal to Dumbledore. Anyways, I won’t give you *all* the details because then we could be here all day. Let’s just say that one night Voldemort found them and raided their home. He murdered James first and Lily died saving baby Harry.”

Hermione took a small breath before moving on. “When Voldemort tried to kill little Harry, something happened and no one, not even

Voldemort, knows what. Somehow Voldemort's curse backfired onto him and Harry lived."

Pansy gave a small gasp. "So the bad wizard died then?"

Hermione sighed. "Well, many believed so. But in actuality, the curse reduced him to a state of *near-death*, and he spent the next fourteen years trying to return to power. Harry managed to foil him in both his first and second year at Hogwarts - which were also both times that Voldemort tried to kill Harry.

"Then, in Harry's fourth year, the Triwizard Tournament came around, and again I'll spare you the details, and just say that Harry and Cedric were in it. The final task that the tournament champions had to perform was a giant maze filled with puzzles and obstacles. Harry and Cedric made it to the trophy, and they grabbed it together. Then they disappeared off the field."

"Was that supposed to happen?" Ally couldn't help asking.

Hermione shook her head grimly. "An imposter in the castle - disguised as a Professor - had changed the trophy into a Portkey. Harry and Cedric were taken away to some graveyard, where Cedric was murdered and Harry watched Voldemort return to power. No one except Harry, Cedric and any Death Eaters present that night, know exactly what happened and how it happened."

Hermione took another breath. This was the hard part. "When Harry finally returned to the field, he was holding tightly onto the wrist of a dead Cedric."

Both Ally and Pansy gasped. Pansy actually had the beginnings of tears shining in her eyes at Hermione's tale. "What happened next?" she said in a voice so quiet it was hard to hear.

"Well, after that, he got a lot of his power back. Because Voldemort's curse had backfired on him all those years ago, he'd left Harry with a scar on his forehead. This scar was essentially a connection between Voldemort and Harry. Harry could often feel when Voldemort was near, then later when he was having strong emotions, and lastly Voldemort's mood in general. In his fifth year, he even got visions of

what Voldemort was doing. He watched Ron's dad get attacked by a massive snake and we were able to save him. After that, Dumbledore insisted Harry learn to close off his mind to any more visions, worried Voldemort knew Harry could see these visions, and that he would take advantage of this connection."

Hermione sighed heavily and her own eyes filled with tears. "Well, he finally did, making Harry believe the person closest to his heart, his godfather Sirius, was being tortured in the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry of Magic. We all faced Voldemort and his followers there in the Department, and Sirius was not being tortured.

"Remember Bellatrix?" The other two girls nodded. "She k-killed Sirius in the Department of Mysteries." Hermione stopped as the tears spilled over her eyes. She personally hadn't been that close to Sirius, by no means as close as Harry, but the fact that he was dead and he was someone close to someone *she* was close to... it hurt to know how bad her world was becoming.

Pansy and Ally looked shocked and empathetic, and now Ally had tears in her eyes. Neither said anything for a moment.

"I - we returned for our sixth year with no idea what would happen this year. The strange thing was that... that everything was completely... *normal*." She paused and sniffed. "And then I had to go and make that stupid wish."

All three girls were quiet, no longer touching their food. All around them people laughed and talked and ate. Shortly, students began to exit the Great Hall and get ready for the day's classes. Hermione stood silently, and Ally and Pansy followed suite. They gathered up their books and plodded out of the Great Hall.

Just before they were about to ascend the beautiful marble staircase from the Entrance Hall, Ally stopped them and gave Hermione a large hug. Pansy smiled a little tearfully still, and hugged Hermione at the same time. Surprised by the gesture, by nonetheless deeply appreciative, Hermione wrapped one around Ally and the other around Pansy, creating a group hug.

"Its real nice to have friends like you." she said quietly.

## **Chapter 11**

Hermione was thankful sixth years were allowed Thursday afternoons off, because it gave her a chance to continue work on the Wish Reversal Potion, although she was starting to get good at getting to it in between some classes.

"Hey Hermione!" Ally called as Hermione hurriedly approached the Portrait hole. "Where are you off to?"

"Er, just going for a walk." she answered quickly.

"Oh! Well, we'll come with you!" Pansy jumped up out of her chair.

"Good idea Pansy." Ally agreed and also stood up.

"Actually, I kind of wanted to... be... " Hermione hesitated. "... alone." She looked from Pansy's face to Ally's face, then added, "To think about - you know - things."

Understanding washed over Ally's face, followed by Pansy's as she nodded slowly.

"Sure thing." Ally smiled and she and Pansy sat back down in their chairs and continued doing what they had been doing before.

Hermione breathed a small sigh of relief and exited the Gryffindor Common Room. She wasn't lying, after all. She did want to be alone, she was going for a walk (although that was not her main purpose) and she was going think 'things' over.

Just a short time later, she arrived in the deserted classroom she was using to make her Potion in. As she read over the instructions and ingredients for at least the hundredth time, she was once again reminded of why this particular potion takes so long to make.

*"Let Fillabeen scales simmer for forty-nine hours before adding a sprinkle of Mulchidna Dust. Stir four times left, three times right, then let simmer for another two hours. Remove heat at such time."*

Hermione sighed and followed the instructions. Everything had to be timed just right or the whole potion could be entirely messed up. She was back to add the Mulchidna Dust this time, let it simmer for two hours, do the stirring, and remove the heat. She has charmed the flame under her cauldron so she could set it like a timer. It was an extremely handy tool to have especially for times when the heat needed to be taken away and she was not able to, being in class or at Quidditch or asleep at such a time.

She added the designated amount of Mulchidna Dust, and let her pot begin to simmer. While the cauldron cooked, Hermione pulled out her journal, which she was currently keeping with the Wish Book and the Coin in this classroom she could write in it whenever she was sitting there waiting for the Potion to cook.

Before writing a new entry, Hermione flipped back in the book a large chunk to a page dated, "August something" and read,

*"Yes, August something. I've been at the Burrow for several days now and I have no idea what day it is. As usual, I am writing from bed, while Ginny sleeps. Things have been going so wonderfully. Yesterday we all went for a walk together, and the others kept getting distracted by this or that. Finally it was just me and Ron, walking along, and I wanted so badly to hold his hand. He seemed embarrassed that it was just the two of us, however, as his ears and cheeks went bright red and he started rambling on about what classes he is taking. I just wish he would figure out how much I really like him."*

Hermione smiled, remembering the incident clearly. Ron was so cute when he was embarrassed. Now that she thought of, she was quite sure everyone knew Hermione liked Ron, except Ron. Ginny seemed first to figure it out, and must have told Harry. The twins were next, and probably told Bill. Mrs. Weasley always seemed to set tasks that only required two, specifically to Ron and Hermione...

Still smiling, she flipped to another entry, this one dated "Sunday, September 7th".

*"I don't want to write at all. I do not feel like doing anything except crying. But I feel I must at least summarize my horrid situation."*



*Something happened and now Ron and Harry are Slytherins. So are Ginny, Katie Bell, Lavender, Parvati - all Slytherin. But I'm Gryffindor. Gryffindor with Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle and Millicent. Harry called me a Mudblood. This is the worst day of my life."*

She shook her head and sadly turned to the next entry, "Monday, September 8th".

*"The wishing Coin did it. It was in my pocket during the fight with Harry and Ron. I did this. I made it this way. I hate it - I want out of this world."*

Hermione sighed and turned several pages until she came to one dated not more than three days ago, hoping this next one was less depressing.

*"How can this be happening? What is wrong with me? I thought I loved Ron - yet I have a totally different reaction when I am around Cedric. But I can't be in love with Cedric! I love Ron! And besides, Cedric doesn't even exist in my world. What's the use in falling in love with him, because when I go back, he'll be dead! What is WRONG with me?"*

Not really any less depressing. It only renewed her emotions on that particular subject and quite frankly she had no idea how to handle them.

She thumbed through the pages to a blank one and began to write.

*"Not a whole lot to say. I'm stuck, for the time being. I have to wait so long for this Potion to brew, I sometimes wonder if I'll ever see my Harry and Ron again. And even more alarming, is when I sometimes wonder if I even should bother with this Potion. I don't why I think that - that's not true. I think that maybe I'll just stay in this perfect world, because Cedric is in this perfect world, and I think I'm falling in love with Cedric."*

A tear suddenly slid down her cheek. It wasn't supposed to become this complicated. It was merely supposed to be that she'd switch it

back as soon as possible. She wasn't ever going to give a thought to leaving things how they were. And yet she was.

She shut her journal tight and wiped her eyes dry. She was Hermione Granger. She would make the Potion work. She would go home - rightfully home - to Harry and Ron. No matter how much it hurt to leave someone behind.

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Two hours later, after Hermione had stirred her potion, removed the heat, added more ingredients as the book instructed, and left it to brew for another thirty-something hours, she started back to Gryffindor Tower. She was deep in thought about her Potion, her upcoming late-night Astronomy class, her feelings for a red-head and curly-haired brunette, and other complications in her life, that she did not notice that red-haired person with his black-haired friend clomping up the stairs. That is, until they called out to her.

"Hey Granger!" Ron yelled.

Hermione stopped at the sound of his voice, which gathered very mixed results. She was happy to hear his voice, saddened to know it wasn't really *him*, and disgusted to know how he was right now. She kept walking at the sound of Harry's voice.

"Hey, Filth!" he shouted.

Hermione kept walking as though she heard nothing, and slowly moved her hand to her wand.

"HEY! We're talking to you, Granger!" Ron shouted snidely.

Hermione quickened her pace, her then quicken their's, but was surprised when they both suddenly move in front of her, effectively cutting her off.

"What's your problem, anyway?" Harry folded his arms across his chest.

"Ya. You deaf or something?" Ron copied Harry's stance.

Hermione stifled a sigh, seeing no easy escape route, excluding hexing them both to the other side of the school. "No, I am not deaf. I just ignore prats." she said, a definite edge to her voice. She moved to get past them, but they moved to be in her way again.

"What's your problem, anyway?" Harry said irritably, obviously not aware he had just repeated himself word for word.

Hermione didn't give Ron a chance to interject his own stupid remark. "You're my problem. Now please get out my way!" She tried once again to step around the two boys and once again they made a point of blocking her path. She stomped her foot in frustration.

"Ooo, *touchy*." Ron scoffed. He lightly elbowed Harry. "How long, you think, before she blows?"

"How long does it take for slime to boil?" Harry rudely answered.

They both chuckled and snickered heartily, their crossed arms shaking, as if that remark was one of the better jokes they'd ever shared together.

Hermione determinedly ignored the shot and clenched her fists. "Get out of my way." she said coldly and evenly.

Ron leaned close to her, supreme dislike etched into his features. Hermione had only seen that look on Ron's face when he regarded Malfoy. "Make me."

"You asked for it." Hermione mumbled, then abruptly shoved herself between the two by putting a hand on each of their shoulders and pushing hard. This resulted in each boy stumbled sideways unexpectedly.

Ron rubbed his shoulder and shouted testily after Hermione, "No need to get *nasty*, Mudblood!"

Hermione's blood boiled and she broke into a run. Her head was mingled with deep sadness and anger as a tear slid out the corner of her eye. '*Anywhere but here...*' she thought, and ran harder.

The two Slytherin boys hollered something after her, but she merely heard the noise, not the words. She was already bounding up the steps, three at a time, trying to get as far away from Harry and Ron as possible.

Why? Why oh *WHY* had she been so careless in her wishing! This was by far the worst thing she had ever done or experienced. Sure, Snape and Malfoy were nice, but she'd lost the two people she cared about most in the exchange.

Hermione reached the seventh floor and saw no one in the hall. She wasn't sure what to do now. If she went into the Common Room, people would see she was upset and press her with all kinds of uncomfortable questions. Even merely passing through would bring up the question of her previous whereabouts. However, if she was to go anywhere else, the possibility of meeting up with Harry and Ron again was too great. She could try and make for a girls washroom or the library, but that still presented her with the problem of running into Harry or Ron on the way.

She looked around the wide hall of the seventh floor and in the far corner, not far from the Gryffindor portrait hole, there was a tall book case, which had been pulled a foot or two away from the wall to its left. It was a prefect, shadowed little spot for one to sit unnoticed.

There.

Hermione walked briskly over to the dark little corner and settled down on the chilled floor, bringing her knees up to her chin. Only her feet were in the light of the hallway. Another tear slid down her cheek. She ignored it and buried her face into her knees, wrapping her arms tightly around her legs. At that moment, she wasn't sure if she could feel any worse.

The same old thoughts drifted through her mind. She wanted Ron - *her* Ron. And Harry, the-Boy-who-lived. She wanted Professor McGonagall, with her kindly smile and strict rules, her understanding and her quirky, rarely seen sense of humor. But she wanted Snape to stay the same: confident, red, and endearing. Malfoy, Ally, Greg, Pansy, Vinny, Millicent - all the same. And Sirius! Alive and well, not murdered by a cold-blooded cousin of his.

And of course Cedric. The Cedric she suddenly yearned for, thought about so often, couldn't help but feel the way she felt about. She would never see him again when she went back.

Hermione tightened her arms around her legs, wishing it were all just a dream. It wasn't fair to have this "parallel universe" dangling in front of her like this, with the knowledge she had to snatch it away the moment she was able to, when she was able to go back where she belonged.

---

As Hermione sat there in the dark corner beside the bookcase, wrapped up in her grief and complicated, repeating thoughts, she didn't notice a person slowly approaching. She was so severely startled to hear when the person spoke, that she flipped her head back and hit it soundly on the wall.

"Hermione?" he ventured, causing Hermione to jump and hit her head.

"Wha - ooo, ow..." she rubbed her head and hastily tried to stand up.

"Sorry."

Hermione tried to make the stars dancing in front of her eyes go away.

"I didn't mean to startle you, I just - "

"Cedric?" Hermione's heart twisted happily. "What are you doing up here on the seventh floor?" she asked.

Cedric looked a tad uncomfortable. "Well, class was over... and I, you know..." he ran his hand through his hair and then let his arm flop to his side. "Truth is, I came to talk to you."

"To me? But how'd you know I'd be here? In the hall, and not in the Common Room, I mean?"

Cedric shrugged sheepishly. "I didn't. I figured I get to that when I got here, if you weren't here. So, to answer your question, I got lucky."

"Oh."

There was a short, awkward silence before Cedric cleared his throat and spoke again. "Anyway, what I came to talk to you about was -" he glanced around for a pair of chairs - "the other day."

Hermione gulped. What was she going to say to explain the way she'd gone on about things Cedric thought didn't exist or never happened? She said nothing, truly not knowing *what* to say.

Cedric bit his lip, the expression on his face revealing he'd been expecting a similar response - or lack of one. He spotted a red couch not too far down the hall and motioned for Hermione to follow.

She reluctantly followed, her brain working madly. She didn't know what to say or how to act. Act like she didn't know what he was talking about? Act like *she* didn't know what she was talking about? Be angry for asking? Walk away? Change the subject? Burst into tears? Tell the truth?

Telling the truth appealed to her the most, as she felt strangely compelled to tell him everything. But it also seemed the option least likely to go over well.

The two of them sat and Cedric wasted no time. "So?" he prodded. "What happened the other day? In the library?"

He didn't need to clarify, she already knew what he meant. "I don't know what to tell you." she said, her voice barely audible, and indeed that was the truth.

"Tell me what happened. What were you talking about? None of it made any sense. It was weird." Cedric said quietly, his voice full of concern.

Hermione sighed and stared at the armrest. What should she tell him? '*Tell the truth.*' Part of her said. '*What have you got to lose?*' She almost agreed, but for the other part of her saying something completely different. '*Get out of this situation.*' The other part of her said. '*He'll never believe the truth.*'

She slowly met his eyes. "You wouldn't believe me, Cedric. You really wouldn't."

“Sure I will! How crazy can it be?” he said encouragingly.

She half-smiled and averted her eyes again. She was quiet for several seconds, battling internally on whether to spill or not.

“Hermione? I’ll listen.” Cedric said and gently took her hand.

She wanted to believe he would listen. She really did. But the gesture of him suddenly holding her hand caught her completely off-guard and her heart sped up. She liked the sensation that was now shooting up her arm... But Ron’s red face and the two of them walking by the Burrow entered her head and she suddenly felt guilty holding Cedric’s hand and pulled away.

“Maybe some other time.” she said and stood.

Cedric looked confused and stood also. “Please tell me. I want to know. I will believe you.”

She shook her head and her stomach felt queasy for some reason. “Someday.” she took a breath to steady her wobbly knees. “Just please go.”

“Hermione?” he looked hurt, and it made her feel hurt just looking at him.

“Its not your fault, *really* it isn’t.” she tried to explain. “I’ll tell you someday. But please, just go.” she said pleadingly and mentally forced herself not to tear up. ‘*You have no reason to cry over this.*’ she thought. ‘*You’re doing the right thing. He wouldn’t believe you anyways.*’

Cedric’s shoulders seemed to sag and he sort of nodded. He said nothing and began to trudge back down the hall away from the Fat Lady’s portrait, towards the staircase, away from Hermione.

He didn’t look back.

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## **Chapter 12**

That Friday seemed slow and boring to Hermione. On one hand, she was happy because there were no surprises and it felt like the first time in weeks that something significant hadn't happened. On the other hand however, this was the one day that she knew something significant was *supposed* to happen. She'd studied her calendar when she'd got up in the morning and there was no mistaking: today was her sixteenth birthday.

In the past, she usually got several things from her family before she left for Hogwarts and enjoyed a mini celebration with them. Then while at Hogwarts, Harry and Ron would quietly give her something, usually a day or two late, and often after Ginny would give them a scorching lecture on how Hermione was their best friend and they couldn't be bothered to remember her birthday.

Thus far, however, it was nearing the end of Herbology and not a single person had acknowledged that it was her birthday. She herself didn't want to say anything. She wasn't entirely sure why she silently refused to say anything, but perhaps it was because she felt that they should be able to remember for themselves. That was how she felt with Harry and Ron, at least.

She sighed loudly and unintentionally and Pansy nudged her. "You ok?"

Hermione's immediate thought was to just blurt, 'No, I am not ok, because today is my birthday and no one cares.' She didn't of course, and instead said, "Oh, nothing really. Its just that today is – er, an important day for me." She studied Pansy's reaction.

"Oh." Pansy merely said, and returned to her Gloriteldna Grass diagram.

Hermione's shoulders sagged a little further. She didn't even ask why it was a special day! Then a rather startling thought occurred to Hermione: what if today was not her birthday? Not that today wasn't September the nineteenth, but what if Hermione Granger was not born on September the nineteenth? Could it be possible? And if it was, how in the world would she knew which day was her birthday?



Hermione shook her head a little to calm down. She leaned past Pansy and tapped Ally's shoulder.

"Yes?" Ally leaned back so she could talk to Hermione.

"Do you know... er, is anything... important happening today?" Hermione asked, struggling to sound casual and not like she really wanted a specific piece of information.

Ally thought for a second. "Nope. Not that I know of." She smiled lightly. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Just wondering." Hermione sighed as she resumed her theory assignment, as she was long finished her Herbology work and had permission to work on something else. *Say something!* Her mind urged. *Just tell them!* But she stubbornly stayed quiet until the end of the class.

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As soon as the bell rang to signal the end of class, Hermione was packed and rushing out of the greenhouse. She thought she heard Draco yell for her to wait a minute, but she didn't feel like slowing or stopping and kept going full speed ahead. She didn't know why she just wanted to get away, she just really did and sped walked across the grounds, up the steps and into Hogwarts.

She was just ascending the stairs to the first floor when someone in the rush of people around her caught her arm. *Draco*. She thought immediately.

"Hey!"

Hermione frustratedly turned and saw not Draco, but Cedric. "What?" she said much more sharply than she'd intended.

"What's wrong? I called your name a bunch of times and you just ignored me! Are you mad at me?" Cedric let go of her arm now, his eyes locked on hers.

"No! No, of course not. I'm not mad at you. I just... its just..." Hermione shook her head and looked away. She felt an

overwhelming urge to cry and could feel the tears already tingling behind her eyes. She did not want to cry. She especially didn't want to cry in the middle of the hall with other students milling around her. "Nothing. Nothing important." She started speed walking again but he caught up with her immediately.

"Hermione, wait!" she reluctantly stopped and he gently steered her off to the side, away from the general flow of students. "Does this have to do with yesterday?"

"No, no." she shook her head vigorously and paused. "And I'm really sorry about that, Cedric, I just – "

"Don't worry about it. But what's wrong then?"

"It's just that – " she took a breath to steady her voice and hold the tears back. It didn't help, for when she spoke, a tear escaped down her cheek and her voice shook like it always does when you're about to cry. "Everyone's forgotten my birthday!"

Hermione looked at the floor, feeling very foolish. She'd cried more in the past few weeks than she had in the past few years combined and it made her feel very foolish indeed. She did not want to break down in front of Cedric.

Cedric tried to hide a grin and, unsuccessfully, suppress a chuckle. "Is that all?"

She nodded miserably.

He laughed quietly. "Oh Hermione." And then he did the most wonderful and unexpected thing.

He hugged her.

Before she could even react the wonderfulness of being in his arms like that, Cedric took her hand and began leading her through the hallway which was slowly becoming less crowded. He led her to her next and last class of the day: Transfiguration.

“How did you know I had this next?” she asked, suddenly realizing she was sure she’s never told him.

Cedric went very pink in the cheeks but did not answer her question. “When the bell rings, wait here for me, ok?” he said.

Hermione nodded, still buzzing pleasantly from his sweet hug and tingling where his hand had held hers.

“Promise?”

Hermione half-smiled. “Sure, I promise. But what for?”

Cedric’s eyes twinkled brightly. “A surprise. You’ll see.”

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Potions seemed to pass much slower than usual and though Snape was in his usual good mood, it didn’t really make the class any better. She made small talk with her friends, annoyed they had forgotten her birthday, feeling bad about feeling annoyed, and yet feeling sort of pleased when she felt like they knew something she didn’t and weren’t telling.

At one point, Hermione suggested they study Transfiguration together tonight in the library and Pansy blurted that she had plans. When Hermione asked what those plans were, Ally rushed to explain for Pansy, saying Pansy already had a study group that night with others. Before Hermione could ask who was in that other study group, the subject had swiftly been changed by Draco.

When the bell finally rang, Hermione joined the small rush of students filing to get out. She waited rather impatiently for Cedric by herself as he friends all seemed to have disappeared the instant class was over, before she could tell them she was staying to wait for Cedric.

Finally he came, a small bouquet of pretty looking and wonderful smelling flowers in his hand, and a heart-melting wide grin on his face. “Happy Birthday, Hermione Granger.” He said and handed her the colorful bouquet.

“Oh Cedric!” her smile instantly became as wide as his and she could feel her cheeks turning brilliant red. No one had ever given her flowers in this way before. Impulsively she threw her arms around Cedric in a warm hug. Almost immediately she realized what she’d just done and Hermione pulled away. She cleared her throat, her cheeks now *very* red and hot.

Cedric ignored her embarrassment. “C’mon, let’s go.” For the second time that day he grasped her hand, sending tingles through her body, as he lead her through Hogwarts hallways.

“Where are we going?” asked Hermione, full of curiosity and suddenly unable to stop smiling.

Cedric glanced over his shoulder at her and patted his pocket. “I’m walking you to – “ he stopped mid-sentence, his eyes widening. He jammed his hand in his pocket and cleared his throat.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Uh, Cedric?”

Suddenly Cedric seemed flustered. “Er, we’re – I’m – we’re walking to... the, um – the Entrance Hall!”

Hermione giggled. She had no idea what Cedric was up to. “Okaaaay...”

He seemed in an all-fired hurry to get to the Entrance Hall, practically bolting through all the hallways. But once there, he seemed to not have any idea what to do next. He looked around and randomly pointed things out.

“Looks like Hufflepuff is leading in House Points!” he said, pointing at the large hour glasses full of shining rocks at the front of the Entrance Hall. “Ravenclaw’s not doing too badly... neither is Gryffindor....”

“What exactly are we doing here, anyways, Cedric?” Hermione asked.

“Slytherin is in last, but not by much...”

“Cedric?”

"The marble staircase looks nice and... shiny." Cedric said and rubbed his neck uncomfortably.

"Cedric?"

"The uh, door! It looks nice and... woody." He patted his pocket forcefully.

"Cedric! Why are we here?" Hermione wasn't annoyed that they were there for no reason, she was annoyed by the fact that he suddenly couldn't or wouldn't look at her or answer her.

"Floor is nice and... clean." Cedric patted his pocket again and sighed exasperatedly.

"Cedric, *what is going on?*"

Again, Cedric didn't answer her question. "How about we go outside? It's nice outside." Cedric swallowed and tried not to meet Hermione's eyes as he pulled her outside. "Yes. Let's go outside."

The sun shone into their faces and a cool autumn breeze flowed past.

"Yes, it is lovely out. But, tell me, why are we out here?" Hermione tried going back to being polite, though she was starting to get very impatient. She was still intrigued and confused by the whole thing, however the feeling of annoyance was steadily growing.

He nodded slowly and again she strongly got the feeling he couldn't look her in the eye. He was looking everywhere but her.

"What's – "

"Ok look!" He blurted, cutting her off. "There's a team out practicing Quidditch!" He pointed towards the pitch and patted his pocket again.

Hermione squinted at the pitch, but could see no one. If there really was a team playing out there, it would be very easy to spot and she wouldn't be squinting. She looked at Cedric.

"Ced – "

"It really *is* nice out, isn't it?" Again he cut her off and *again* he patted his pocket. Hermione wondered if that was a nervous habit of some sort and if so, why was he so nervous?

Relief suddenly swept over Cedric, seemingly for no apparent reason. "Aah," he half-sighed, as if he'd just lowered himself into a nice warm bath. "Shall I walk you to Gryffindor Tower then?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not until you tell me what is going on."

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Um, on the way." He headed back inside without waiting for an answer, and Hermione felt she had no choice but to follow him.

Once inside and heading in the general direction that would lead them to Gryffindor Tower, Cedric was walking extra slowly, as if he were some tourist in an extravagant museum, seeing everything for the first time and trying to take it in all at once. Indeed, he was almost acting like it, gazing around at all the paintings and suits of armor and doors and carpets and looking pretty well everywhere except at Hermione.

Under different circumstances, Hermione may have considered walking very slowly through Hogwarts with Cedric to be a touch romantic. But the way he had acted so strangely moments before and the way he just *wouldn't* look at her, made her feel very annoyed instead of a touch romantic.

Fed up, Hermione stepped ahead and stood in front of Cedric, stopping him in his tracks. He looked a little surprised to see her standing there. "Er... what's up?" he said, trying to keep his tone light and casual and failing miserably.

"Will you *please* explain to me why we are touring Hogwarts like we've never been here before? Why we stood outside and looked at Quidditch players who were not playing?" She tried not to sound completely demanding, with one hand on her hip and the other tightly holding the lovely bouquet.

"Uh..." Cedric dropped his gaze to the floor and rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. He cleared his throat. "I... well, you see..."

he looked up, though not at her. Something to the left of her head held his eyes as he rubbed his ear. His cheeks went a little pink and he glanced briefly at her before returning his gaze to the floor.

Hermione felt less annoyed now and more confused. What was so hard for him to say? She inwardly calmed herself down and softly encouraged, "I'm listening." She hoped the fact that she was no longer angry-sounding helped to ease his nervousness.

He cleared his throat again, bit his lip and finally turned his eyes up to meet Hermione's. His cheeks flared pink before he even spoke. "I just wanted to spend time with you... away from everything else." He swallowed but didn't drop his eyes again. "I guess I'm just not good at it."

Hermione's irritation completely melted away and the hand that had been firmly on her hip now sagged at her side. He just wanted to *be with her*? Had she really heard right? Her cheeks were growing warm and she felt pleasantly odd.

"P-pardon?" her stomach clenched and unclenched and she didn't know why.

This time Cedric wasted no time in repeating himself and he seemed more confident, talking louder and clearer than before. "I wanted to spend time with you. Away from others."

Her heart was beating very fast... very fast... surely a heart beating that fast wasn't healthy... her mouth was open slightly... she couldn't close it... such a small comment had such a big effect and she didn't know why...

"Really?" her voice was merely a whisper. Perhaps she was reacting this way because no one had ever said something like that to her before. Viktor had complimented her, of course, though much differently. And when Viktor had complimented her, she had taken it graciously, enjoying his attention for what it was, knowing they would only ever end up as friends. Of course, part of it had always been to make Ron see she wasn't just like him and Harry. She wasn't just one of the guys.

“Really.” He said and smiled. It was that grin that made Hermione’s knees wobble.

She took a breath to control her insides, as they seemed to be going crazy and she feared her skin was the only thing keeping her from going everywhere at once. *He wanted to spend time with me... just me...*

“Thank you.” She said, truly not knowing what else to say.

From there, the two continued on to Gryffindor Tower talking occasionally but mostly just in a comfortable silence, merely enjoying each other’s company. When they arrived at the Fat Lady – who, for the moment didn’t notice them – Hermione let out a sigh. She didn’t want this to end.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, right?” she said.

“Of course!” Cedric smiled widely before leaning in to gave her a tight hug. “Happy Birthday, again.”

“Bye.” She said quietly as he let go of her and took a few steps back.

“Bye.” He said, matching her tone and didn’t make any more of a move to leave.

Hermione tore her eyes away from Cedric, walked the last few steps to the Fat Lady and said, “Lefitoldna.”

The Fat Lady seemed a little surprised to see Hermione standing there and then seemed to eye Cedric suspiciously over Hermione’s shoulder. “And you’re sure that’s correct?” She kept a very wary eye on Cedric.

“Oh, he’s – um, just leaving.” Hermione explained hurriedly.

“Yes. Just leaving.” Cedric began backing down the hallway. What Hermione didn’t notice right then was the instant non-verbal exchange between Cedric and the Fat Lady as they each winked.



Hermione cleared her throat politely, wondering why the Fat Lady was taking so long to let her in, but deciding not to question it as it really didn't matter all that much. The Fat Lady opened unusually slow, saying, "I *suppose* I ought to let you in..."

Hermione raised an eyebrow but still said nothing. The Fat Lady could be odd at times, and she merely assumed it was just one of those times. She turned and gave Cedric a tiny wave, which he returned, before entering the Common Room. As soon as her feet hit the crimson carpet of the Gryffindor Common Room, Hermione received one of the most pleasant shocks of her life.

## **Chapter 13**

“SURPRISE!” Everyone in the room chorused.

There was clapping and laughing and several popping noises as Hermione’s eyes flitted about the room, her mouth wide open in shock. Red and gold confetti spewed from somewhere near the roof. Different colored balloons were tied in brilliant bunches around the room and everything seemed to have a wonderful glow about it. There were more than a few showy-looking banners hanging here and there which read, in shimmering letters, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY HERMIONE!” Near the back of the room, just past the people, Hermione could see a corner of what appeared to be a long table covered in glorious, delicious food.

“Oh wow!” she exclaimed, merely a second later. “Oh – I – my goodness!” she felt truly at a loss for words.

Everyone giggled, chuckled and beamed at her, delighting in the fact that they had completely fooled her. Mixed in with the numerous Gryffindors were a tiny handful of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, including Cho.

“We got special permission from Dumbledore.” Cedric, suddenly at her side, said quietly as the rest of the room broke into song.

*“Happy Birthday... to you...”*

“Thank you.” Hermione whispered.

“For what?” Cedric half-smiled and whispered back.

“For keeping the surprise a surprise.”

As the others sang, Hermione happily looked from face to face. Vinny and Greg looked smart and cheerful. Draco looked genuinely happy and honest. Pansy looked pretty – not like the pug face Hermione was used to. Indeed nearly all the people before her looked truly wonderful and Hermione knew it was in huge part because they weren’t sneering, sulking, cackling, glaring, mocking, angry, vengeful or bitter.

The song ended and the cake was cut. Pieces were quickly passed out and the noise level escalated significantly as everyone talked and ate and reenacted Hermione's entrance. The cake was fluffy and white with tangy orange flavored icing – her favorite.

Hermione stood off to the side of the food table in a small group which included Cedric, Ally, Draco, Vinny and Pansy.

"Alright, so now you have to explain." She said and eyed Cedric suspiciously. "What was with you patting your pocket constantly?"

The small group all laughed before taking turns explaining.

"We each had these coins." Cedric started as he, Draco, Ally and Vinny pulled large silver coins from their pockets. "When I patted my pocket – "

"He was asking us if we were ready yet." Ally interjected.

"We would pat back." Draco put his coin back in his pocket and demonstrated. "Once to say go slow we're almost ready, twice to say STALL LIKE MAD, and three time's to say all's well."

"It'd vibrate in my pocket hard when they mean stall like mad, it'd get very warm when they were ready, and become very cold when they wanted me to go slow." Cedric further explained.

Ally giggled. "Had to keep giving Ced the double vibrations for stall like mad for a while there until we had everything under control."

"And the cake!" Pansy lifted her pointer finger. "Do *not* forget about the cake incident!"

They all laughed heartily before Draco explained.

"Pansy and Greg went to pick up the cake from the kitchens. Apparently earlier in the day one of the House Elfs had made it with salt instead of sugar, so it had to be re-made."

Hermione covered her mouth and chuckled. "Oh no. What happened then?"

Pansy smirked. "Greg and I stayed and helped them so we could get the cake finished on time."

They all burst out laughing at this last bit, because of, as Draco put it, "the image of Greg in an apron baking a cake with a mess of House Elfs".

"So that's why I didn't see Greg after Herbology..." Hermione said thoughtfully and they all shared another laugh as the image of Greg in an apron stayed in their minds another moment.

After that, there were numerous games, both organized and unorganized, lots of food, chatting and above all, laughter. Hermione had the time of her life and was very easily able to completely forget about everything except the fun that was happening right then.

Several hours later, the crowd had been reduced to just six: Draco, Pansy, Ally, Greg, Cedric and Hermione. Greg was yawning excessively and finally announced that he'd be heading to bed. Draco joked that he doubted that Greg would even make it to his bed at the rate he was going.

Moments after that, Draco made small talk and Hermione found herself wishing she could be alone with Cedric for a little while. She looked pleadingly at Ally who clearly read her friend's thoughts.

A sly smile crept across Ally's features. She giggled suddenly and whispered something to Pansy, who immediately went very red in the face.

"I *couldn't!*" she hissed.

"Pardon?" said Draco and Pansy went even redder.

"Pansy needs to talk to you ,Draco." Ally said, trying hard not to grin. "Alone."

Draco's cheeks flushed a little bit. "Er... o-ok." He stood and awkwardly headed for the portrait hole.

Pansy shot Ally a death glare, Ally let herself smile from ear to ear, and the Pansy followed Draco into the hallway.

“What did you say?” Hermione asked, her mouth wide open.

Ally laughed. “Something to the effect of: wouldn’t you just love to be alone with Draco right now so you can confess your undying love to him?”

Hermione opened her mouth wider, trying not to laugh, as she heard Cedric snort beside her. “Ally!” she chided.

“Oh please. I’m doing her a favor.” Ally said matter-of-factly. “She’s liked him *forever*, long before you dated him – “

Hermione reddened at the mention of her dating Draco. *Ew*. She thought and immediately felt bad for thinking it.

“ – which was never a sore point, so don’t feel bad.” Ally looked as though she could have gone on, but then she got a funny gleam in her eye and eyed Cedric. “Speaking of *liking* people...”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she shot Ally a panicked look that clearly said, *You wouldn’t!*

Ally giggled and stood. “Off to bed for me then!” she skipped to the girl’s dorm, all the while loudly whistling “L-O-V-E”.

Hermione made a mental note to strangle Ally in the morning if hse didn’t hug her in thanks first.

She and Cedric were quiet for a few moments, Hermione’s heart pounding the whole time. She didn’t know what to say or what he was going to say or if he was going to say anything or how she should act or how he should act or if he was going to do anything at all...

“So, how was your birthday today?” Cedric asked, turning to her.

Hermione smiled. “Absolutely wonderful.” She meant it. “Thanks for being a part of it.” she added.

“No problem.”

They were quiet for another few seconds before Cedric spoke again.

“Look, I don’t know if it’s been bothering you or not, but I have to say it.” he paused and Hermione wasn’t sure what he was talking about. “Earlier today, when I was stalling for time... I wasn’t stalling... exactly. I mean I didn’t... it wasn’t... er...”

Hermione quirked an eyebrow but said nothing.

“Ok, that’s not what I mean. They wanted me to stall and so I was walking slowly and everything, but...” he gave a frustrated sigh, bit his lip and inhaled deeply. Suddenly he took both of her hands in his. “When I said that I wanted to spend time with you away from everything else, I wasn’t lying or stalling. It was – *is* the truth.”

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat.

“Having the party and being the one to volunteer first to be the one to do the stalling was just a very convenient way to accomplish that.” He smiled smally.

Hermione felt overwhelmed at the pure kindness and warmth radiating from Cedric’s eyes and the way he spoke so genuinely.

“Really?” she whispered, her mind blank.

He chuckled. “Really.”

She had the urge to spill everything right then – to tell him about the wish and everything that went with it. But she didn’t want *anything* to destroy the moment, and so she said nothing, fearing that the truth could very well wreck the way the very air around her seemed to be tingling.

He tentatively began leaning towards her.

*He’s going to kiss me!* She thought, glee and adrenaline suddenly rocketing through her. She slowly leaned forward as well to meet him in the middle...

Their lips were mere inches away when the portrait hole opened noisily, causing them both to jump back. Pansy and Draxo came stumbling into the Common Room, laughing rather raucously.

“Oops! They’re still here!” Draco said and then began whispering loudly. “Sorry!”

“Don’t mind us!” Pansy whispered, equally as loudly.

They covered their mouths and unsuccessfully attempted to muffle their laughter before dashing up to their respective dormitories.

Hermione turned back to Cedric and disappointedly noted the moment had very much passed. She half-smiled.

Cedric sighed a little. “Its getting real late. I’d better go.” He said.

Hermione nodded and stood with him. “Yeah.” She walked with him to the portrait hole. “G’night Ced. See you tomorrow.”

“Night Hermione.” Cedric planted a quick, sweet kiss on her cheek. “Happy Birthday.” He said and disappeared out the portrait hole.

Hermione lightly touch the spot on her cheek that Cedric had kissed with trembling fingers. That was the best birthday gift she’d yet received.

## **Chapter 14**

The next day was Saturday and Hermione awoke still feeling very light-hearted and cheerful. The letter she received at breakfast only added to the feeling.

*"Dear Hermione,*

*Glad to hear you're making friends, though sad to hear Harry and Ron are not among them because of the way they are now. I think I would pay money to see Snivellus smile without being smug or evil.*

*Sorry it took so long for me to reply. I've had public appearances and autograph signings coming out my ears. And apparently I have an agent and apparently he and I are the only two who know how to get into or even find Grimmauld Place. And apparently there is a concert coming up. That will be very interesting.*

*Anyways, on the days when I'm not being publically adored and mauled, I'm stuck at home. So I decided to make use of the little time I have at home and have been doing some research on the people we know – or knew, I suppose I should say.*

*Remus Lupin, it seems, never got bit by a werewolf. He's currently teaching at some fancy high-up Wizarding University in France. He's married, too, though I haven't yet found out who to.*

*The Weasley family is a very wealthy, very influential, very disliked family. Bill Weasley is a small bald man, keeping a dingy bookstore on the corner between Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. Charlie cleans carpets for a living. Percy, Fred, George, Ron and Ginny you already know about. Arthur Weasley isn't officially part of the Ministry, though it seems he spends much of his time there threatening, black-mailing and bribing things to go his way without getting caught. Remind you of anyone? Molly stays home, making sure the Weasley Manor stays spotless, ordering her seven House Elves (sorry, I know how you feel about House Elf labor). The house has forty-nine rooms, eight bathrooms, three kitchens, a massive swimming pool and more than five guest rooms. Like anyone is going to want to stay with them.*



*Our good friend Rubeus Hagrid was a little more difficult to track down. Apparently he is an excessively introverted Magical Creature vetrenarian. He graduated from Hogwarts with good marks, including an Outstanding in Care of Magical Creatures. I figured this makes sense since there was no Riddle to open the Chamber and frame him – the act that got him expelled, as you know.*

*Anyways, that's who and what I have so far. I'm trying to dig some stuff up on the old Order members, but nothing much so far. Anyone you're particularly interested in, let me know and I'll see what I can do.*

*Also, going to Hogsmeade as Snuffles would probably be the easiest thing for me. Somehow I've managed to keep the fact that I'm an Animagi quite secret – my agent seems to have no idea. If I'm Snuffles, I won't get mobbed by fan girls. So let me know when the next Hogsmeade weekend is and hopefully we can set something up soon.*

*I'd better go. I think my agent is here and he'll probably have a massive stack of Weird Sisters paraphernalia and memorabilia for me to sign.*

*Keep chin your chin up, Hermione. Talk to you soon.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sirius “*

Hermione sighed with a small smile as she rolled up the letter and slid it into her bag. Although the news about the Weasley family was certainly depressing, the rest had been such good news it overshadowed it at that moment. She thought of Lupin and Hagrid and had to smile wider.

“What now?” Ally asked, also smiling. “Is it from Ced?”

Hermione shook her head. “No. It's another letter from Sirius.” She replied nonchalantly, having completely forgotten the effect the name ‘Sirius Black’ had on her friend.

Ally's spoon clattered loudly into her bowl and her eyes went as wide as saucers. "Sirius – h-he wrote back?" She gulped air as if she was having trouble breathing. "Hermione – you – I – him – NO WAY."

"What?" Pansy questioned confusedly, pulling her concentration away from the comics of the *Daily Prophet*.

Ally pointed at Hermione and squeaked. "She's friends with Sirius Black!"

Pansy also dropped her spoon loudly into her bowl before clapping her hands over mouth. "Sod off – that can't be true." She said through her fingers.

Ally nodded her head vigorously. "She is! She really is! I didn't believe her before, but she just a got a *personal* letter *back* from him!"

Pansy squealed and her cheeks were suddenly looking pinker. "He's so wonderful – Hermione, can I have an autographed picture?"

"Me too! Oh, me too, please Hermione? Please, *please*?" Ally begged.

Hermione looked from one to the other and laughed. "I can ask him." She smiled amusedly and laughed again when her two friends squealed gleefully and hugged each other. They thanked her heartily several times each, grinning widely.

Hermione giggled and started back in on her breakfast. Ally and Pansy breathlessly swapped ideas of what they were going to do with their authentic autographed pictures of Sirius Black.

---

That evening, just a little bit before she headed to bed, Hermione sat at a desk in the Common Room and scratched out a reply to Sirius.

*"Dear Sirius,*

*Just got your letter. Hopefully your concert goes well! Thank you so much for taking the time to find out all those things about the people we know – or, knew, I guess. I really appreciate it and I really enjoyed reading it. I feel very happy for Professor Lupin and Hagrid.*

*Yesterday was my birthday and it was excellent. Everyone threw me a surprise birthday party. It was so wonderful. Even Cedric got to come; he and some other Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs got special permission to attend, since the party was held in Gryffindor Common Room.*

*Hogsmeade weekends are every other Saturday here. The next one is scheduled a week from now, on the twenty-seventh. Tell me what you think about "Snuffles" visiting.*

*Anyways, it's getting pretty late and I ought to head to bed. Oh, I almost forgot. Would you mind sending two autographed pictures back with your reply? Ally and Pansy are apparently two of your "biggest fans".*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione "*

Hermione smiled, satisfied with her letter and packed away her quill and spare parchment. Once in the girl's dormitories, a wide yawn escaped her and she settled comfortably into bed. She could hear the soft, rhythmic breathing of the other girls and within moments, she too was fast asleep.

---

The dream was intensely real. And I started out nice enough: she was laughing and having fun with Harry and Ron. Everything was real and normal. She could feel the worn couch beneath her, she could smell the smell that always seemed present when Ron was around, she could taste the water she took a sip of.

Immediately and without question, she knew the wish and Cedric were all part of an elaborate, realistic dream. Finally, she'd woken up from it's complexity and everything was back to the way it should be.

She talked animatedly with them about all the fun times they'd had together. They each told their own versions of certain events and there seemed to be no concept of time. No homework, no classes, not even any other students. And yet it still felt completely perfect and normal.

Smiles and laughter, more laughter, and more smiles...

"Remember when I went to the Yule Ball with Viktor?" Hermione said, grinning.

Ron howled with laughter. "Oh that was classic!"

Harry suddenly stopped laughing and looked deadly pale and serious. "Remember the TriWizard Tournament?" he said in a trembling voice. Sweat suddenly was on his forehead and Ron didn't seem to notice.

"Harry?" Hermione asked with concern.

Harry turned to her and his eyes were black instead of intense green and he looked scared and haunted. "Remember when Voldemort came back and Cedric was *murdered*?"

*Murdered... murdered... murdered...*

The word echoed horribly. The room twisted around Hermione in a blur as if she had suddenly latched onto a PortKey. Suddenly she found herself in a huge, dark and sinister graveyard. She felt intensely cold and didn't understand what was going. Confused, she tried to call out.

Her voice sounded muffled and short like she's just yelled into a pillow. She looked around and couldn't comprehend what was going on, as the cold made her begin shivering.

That's when she saw it. And heard it.

The scene she'd only heard described to her once, the scene that had formed in her imagination, the scene which she had always tried to forget though she had never actually seen it with her own eyes.

*Murdered... murdered... murdered...*

The echo continued terribly, seeming to get louder. She squinted at the figures in the distance for only a second before they became alarmingly close and crystal clear.

Harry was writhing on the ground, screaming in pain... Cedric was standing beside him... a hooded figure yelled and she didn't know what it said... a blinding flash of green light... Cedric fell to the ground... dead.

She screamed in horror – or at least, she tried. Her vocal chords strained and no sound escaped her lips. She turned to run and felt like she was running in slow motion... she was wearing cement shoes... it took very muscle in her body to lift her foot... one step away...

The next instant, Cedric was laying before her, bloody and dead though the Killing Curse leaves no mark.

She tried to scream again and pushed harder to get away. The feeling of immobility lifted significantly and she moved in a different direction several steps before he was there again.

Pale... dead... staring...

*MURDERED... MURDERED... MURDERED...*

---

Hermione sat up with a yelp, crying hard. It was an awful nightmare. Horrible. Terrible. The worst one yet.

And yet she couldn't deny the note of truth that hit her forcibly in the stomach at that moment and somehow that was almost more depressing and disturbing than the image in the dream.

Where she belonged, when she went back, there would be no Cedric. Cedric was dead.

She shut her eyes and took deep, gulping breaths to stop her shuddering sobs. When she finally opened her eyes, they stung with fresh tears. She forcefully swallowed them back. As much as she was going to hate herself for what she was going to do, it was the only way.

The world she was living in was fake. It didn't truly exist, no matter how much she wanted it to. She didn't belong – how many times did she have to remind herself of that fact before it finally sunk in? She couldn't get too attached – and obviously falling in love was classified as “too attached” – to anything this world.

With the Granger resolve welling up in her, momentarily muting the pain that arrived in waves at the thought of what she had to do, Hermione lay back down on her pillow and shut her eyes against any more tears. She would have to be prepared to see a lot *less* of Cedric Diggory.

## **Chapter 15**

On Sunday, Hermione moved on with her day rather uneasily. Her head was filled with the disturbing images of her nightmare and she felt as though she couldn't shake them no matter what she did to distract herself.

She barely saw Cedric, as she had homework and Quidditch practice in between meals. Nott was working them extra hard, as the first match of the season was Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff on the eleventh of October. He was determined to win every match that came their way, though the rest of his team highly doubted that they could win every match. Nonetheless, they gave practices their all, in hopes that they *might* be able to win them all.

During meals, Cedric sat at the Ravenclaw table, laughing and chatting with his friends while Hermione did her best not to look at him, not to think about him or her dream, and to act like she wasn't purposely trying not to look at him. She didn't eat much and Pansy asked if everything was alright. Hermione smiled and replied everything was just fine, she just wasn't feeling very hungry that day.

Evening came and Hermione was dismayed to find that she was relieved about not having to confront Cedric all day. She wasn't even close to working out what she would say to him or how she would explain that she couldn't see him anymore. She had no idea what she was going to do when he asked why she was suddenly trying very hard to avoid him.

She went to bed and tossed and turned restlessly the entire night.

On Monday, it again proved easy to avoid Cedric without it appearing like she was trying to do just that. She took coincidentally took different routes to each of her classes than usual and since none of her classes were with Ravenclaw, she didn't have to deal with Cedric being her class.

After classes, it seemed Cedric's team was scheduled for Quidditch practice. Since she happened to have a huge amount of homework (more than normal due to her inability to concentrate as well as usual),

she was again able to easily avoid seeing him or talking to him without it being obvious.

Her dread of confronting of him grew. She knew he needed to hear the truth, but somehow there was something deep and strong that prevented her from saying it. She'd readily explained to Ally and Pansy, and even Draco, so why couldn't she just tell Cedric? She didn't understand it and felt like she couldn't overcome it. It was frustrating and yet she did nothing about it.

In the late evening, when all her homework was finally finished, she headed to bed and was again restlessly tossing and turning until sleep finally caught up with her. Her dreams were many but vague so she didn't remember any of them when she awoke the next morning.

Tuesday morning was very uneventful, except for the fact that Hermione was inexplicably nervous, distracted and jumpy the entire duration of Herbology. She had an idea why she was acting so strange, but the others around her of course did not.

"Miss Granger!" Professor Sprout gave a startled shout from the other side of the room. "Do pay attention and *watch* what you're doing!"

The plant they were dealing with that day was a particularly sensitive and testy plant. At that moment, Hermione was distractedly pouring far too much water into its pot. Much of it was running over the side as the little plant was waving its leaves in severe protest. Hermione had been thinking too hard about other things she hadn't even noticed the excess water dripping off the table onto her shoes.

"Sorry Professor!" Hermione hastily corrected the situation and cleaned the chilly water that had made her socks damp. She gave up on the plant and began working on the mass of questions assigned to them. She'd barely written one answer down when her mind drifted back to her situation.

When she noticed Hermione's eyes glazed over and staring at the same question for nearly two full minutes, Ally nudged her friend gently. "You alright?" she asked concernedly.



“Huh?” Hermione jumped. She hadn’t heard her friend speaking but had felt the nudge and Ally’s questioning stare boring into her. “What was that?”

Ally blinked. “I asked if you’re alright.”

“Oh yes, I’m fine.” Hermione answered quickly and rather unconvincingly.

Ally and Pansy exchanged glances before settling back to continue with their own assignments. They would pry later.

Hermione was trembling all over the entire walk to Grubbly-Planks’ hut for Care of Magical Creatures. Her mouth was dry and though she had been attempting to rehearse things to say all morning, the words that’d she’d been trying to remember for the moment she saw Cedric fled. She couldn’t understand why she was so scared and nervous about telling him the truth and could understand even less why all she wanted to do at that every moment was flee.

She saw him standing there with a friend or two as she, Ally and Pansy were making their way over. He smiled at her and excused himself from his friends to come over to greet her. The images of him lying dead at her feet flashed through her head at an alarming rate and it took every ounce of will to stay standing where she was.

“Hey.” He grinned widely and Hermione felt that familiar feeling of wobbly knees at the sight. “Haven’t seen you in a few days. How have you been?”

Hermione’s thoughts raced in the span of a split second. *What do I say? I can’t be with him... I can’t... he’s dead... dead... You’re not dead... he’s dead... he doesn’t exist... Tell him the truth... You have to tell him the truth... If you love him, tell him the truth... I can’t avoid him forever... dead... dead...*

She swallowed. “Good.” She said quietly.

“Good.” Cedric obviously didn’t see the internal struggle going on behind her eyes. He went to hold her hand like he often did, but she moved it up to clutch her books with both arms. She kept a smile

pasted on her face as his twitched ever so slightly, though he seemed to almost immediately dismiss the idea that she had moved her hand on purpose.

Ally and Pansy exchanged worried glances again, though neither Cedric or Hermione noticed.

Professor Grubbly-Planks started the class, which turned out to be a class filled with questions, assignments and diagrams rather than a practical class. Hermione was totally relieved as she had been petrified of what was going to happen when she had to get a partner. The students settled on the browning grass to complete all the assignments given.

Hermione worked very hard and was quiet the entire time, putting all of her energy into concentrating solely on the task before her. Any conversations directed at her, especially from Cedric, she answered shortly but politely. Ally and Pansy continued to exchange glances and Cedric seemed increasingly confused as to why Hermione was coming off coldly, though he didn't comment.

She avoided his eyes the whole time.

Hermione's stomach was churning guiltily and she had an unpleasant feeling of something hanging over her head. She knew it was the fact that she hadn't talked to him yet, hadn't explained her coldness, and most of all, hadn't merely just told him the truth.

At the bell signaling the end of class, Hermione's books were already shut and put away in her bag. She hurriedly helped Ally pack her things before grabbing her wrist and speeding away across the grounds.

"Hermione! What – " Ally started to ask and had to jog hard to keep up with Hermione.

"Just wait!" Hermione hissed and practically hauled Ally up the steps into the castle.

Ally made an irritated sound but didn't comment further until they had reached the Charms classroom. Hermione dashed in and chose a

seat at the back of the classroom where she had Ally sit down beside her. Not surprisingly, they were the first two students there.

“Now will you please explain to me what’s going on?” Ally said in exasperation. Hermione opened her mouth to speak but Ally kept going. “Why have you been acting weird all day? Why are you not looking at or talking to Cedric all of the sudden? Why were you in such a ruddy hurry to get here and leave the rest of our friends down at Grubbly-Planks’ hut? And *why*, after so many classes of sitting with Cedric in Charms, are you going to suddenly sit on the opposite side of the classroom with me?”

When the flow of questions from Ally ceased, Hermione took a steadying breath and very briefly explained her dream a few nights ago to Ally. Ally seemed annoyed at first when Hermione began talking but when Hermione had finished explaining the dream, Ally nodded understandingly.

“So now you think that since Cedric doesn’t exist in the world you’re trying to get back to, there’s no way you can fall in love with him now?”

Hermione nodded glumly as a few students filed in to take their seats.

“And you haven’t talked to him yet?”

Hermione shook her head.

“And... you think that when you explain everything to him, he won’t believe you and will be angry or laugh at you, only making this whole thing ten times harder?”

Hermione nodded again, her eyes stinging unexpectedly with tears.

Ally sighed. “Well, I don’t blame you. But what exactly are you going to tell him – *when* you tell him, that is?”

“The truth.” Hermione replied quietly. “And hope for the best, I suppose.”

Ally nodded slowly. "Well, although it will likely be extremely hard, I do think it'd be the best idea."

Hermione was about to protest though she knew her friend was right when Ally continued.

"Before you say anything, think about how it would be if you *lied* to him before you went back. You could never come back to tell him the truth or apologize for lying to him. You tell him the truth – like what you told me – and he may not believe you or he might laugh or get angry, but at least you'll know you told him the truth."

Hermione stared at the desk and blinked back the tears she did not want to shed in the middle of a Charms classroom that was fast filling up.

"Besides, if he really loves you, it'll all work out." Ally reassured.

Hermione said nothing. What her friend said made a lot of sense, but at the same time, Hermione did not want to hear the word "love" in reference to Cedric. It was only going to make things a hundred times harder.

"And don't leave it for too long or it will only get harder." Ally added. "Look at how hard it's becoming after only a few days."

"Yes, I know." Was all Hermione could think to say.

At that moment, Cedric walked into Charms, followed by the friends he'd been standing with down at Grubbly-Planks' hut. His smile faltered when he spotted Hermione sitting on the far side of the room with Ally, as he and Hermione had taken to sitting together in one of the middle rows on the near side of the room.

Hermione looked up and turned rather pink as the look on his face made it clear he was thoroughly confused and a bit hurt. He kind of half-smiled at her, searching for some sort of reassurance. She wanted to smile back and she almost did. But then his dead form filled her mind again and all she could do was look away.

Ally offered Cedric a sympathetic smile as he sat in a heap with someone else. Pansy sat behind Ally and Hermione with Draco. It was less than a minute after Flitwick had blazed into class and Pansy was already discreetly passing a note to Ally.

*What's wrong?* It read in Pansy's bubbly script.

Ally glanced at Hermione who was feverishly taking notes. *Later.* She wrote and passed the note back to Pansy.

The rest of class went by fast and uneventfully. Flitwick mercilessly gave them a massive amount of homework to have completed for their next class even though many of them had not completed last classes stack of assignments. At the bell, Hermione was out of her chair so fast, Ally didn't even have time to close her textbook before Hermione was heading out the door.

Hermione was just about on the sixth floor when a panting Cedric finally caught up with her.

"Hey, I called your name like ten times. You deaf or something?" He joked, still half-jogging to keep up with her. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Er... no." She truly hadn't.

"Well – hey, slow down, will you?" he chuckled and pulled lightly on her arm to slow her down. "Where's the fire?"

She didn't answer and plowed on, her head bowed down. He caught her arm a second time and pulled her to a stop.

"Ok, honestly Hermione. What is wrong?" he let go of her elbow. "Why were you sitting with Ally in Charms? And acting all... I don't know... in Care of Magical Creatures?"

Hermione stared at her shoes, biting her lip. This was it. She had to tell him now.

When she didn't answer right away, Cedric asked, "Is it me? Did I do something? Are you mad at me?"

“No.” Hermione looked up quickly to answer him. She only held his eyes for a moment before dropping them again.

“Well... you’re kind of acting like it.” he paused. “If it’s not me, then what is it?”

*Tell him. She thought. Just explain like you explained to Ally.*

But again, there was that... that *something* holding her back. She thought about what it would be like to see him laughing at her and thinking her story was a good joke. She thought about what it would be like to see him angry and confused as to why she was treating him this way. She thought about what it would be like to see him just accept her story with worries or doubts.

*Tell him the sodding truth.*

And she was going to – she really was! But when her eyes met his, all the words and her story and everything died in her throat. She went completely blank and couldn’t bear to hurt him or herself. So she said what came to her mind next.

“I...” she started and he waited expectantly. “I... I’m... really stressed about Quidditch.” she exhaled and wanted to stamp on her own foot or knock her head against a wall.

Cedric, however, grinned and laughed. “That’s all? Really?”

She nodded guiltily.

He laughed again and Hermione found she never wanted to hear that laugh used against her. It was far too pleasant a sound to her ears for that.

“Gee, I was worried it was something more serious than that.” He said.

Hermione forced a wobbly smile. “More serious than Quidditch? Is there such a thing?”

Cedric laughed again.

*I sounded like Wood.* Hermione thought and kept her forced smile on. She hated herself for not being able to just say it and walked beside him until they were forced to part ways. He kissed her on the forehead and ran to catch up with one of his friends.

In her dorm that night, after her light was turned out and she was lying in bed, she had only one thought sticking uncomfortably in her mind.

*Coward.*

## **Chapter 16**

The next three days passed rather similarly. She did her homework, attended Quidditch practice, and spent a minimal amount of time with Cedric. She sat with Ally during Wednesday's Charms class and paired off with Pansy for the duration of Friday's Care of Magical Creatures class. She acted neutral to Cedric, which was definitely noticeably different from her previous warmth.

Nights became quite sleepless due to guilt and dread, amplified by the nightmares that seemed to get worse each night. In those three days, it was suddenly a regular occurrence to wake up twice in a terrified sweat with images of a murdered Cedric swimming before her eyes.

Saturday was the Hogsmeade weekend and Hermione made herself solidly promise, that no matter what, she would explain everything. And no matter how badly he reacted, she would tell Cedric the truth.

It didn't exactly quell her unease, but she felt somehow comforted nonetheless.

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Saturday turned out to have rather gloomy weather, which of course did nothing to lighten Hermione's mood. She had butterflies in her stomach that felt as though they were multiplying with every passing minute. She still was worried about Cedric's reaction to her telling the truth and even more concerned about how she was going to word it.

"Have you told him yet?" Ally asked, her hands in her coat pockets as she and Hermione walked ahead of Draco and Pansy on the way to Hogsmeade.

Hermione shook her sullenly.

Ally groaned. "*Hermion-neeee!*"

"I know, I know!" Hermione said. "But I'm going to tell him today. For sure – I've decided." For some reason, saying it outloud made the butterflies become bats.



Ally sighed. "It'll be alright, Hermione. I'm sure it will."

Hermione nodded mutely. She and Ally were quiet the rest of the time it took to reach the Three Broomsticks, listening Draco and Pansy's animated laughter-filled conversation behind them.

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At the Three Broomsticks, Hermione and her friends settled at a table that was in full view of the door. They each got a Butterbeer and Hermione finally gave up trying to rehearse what she was going to say to Cedric.

Draco was telling a funny story which made Pansy and Ally burst out laughing, but Hermione wasn't really listening.

"Remember that one time when we let loose fireworks in McGonagall's office?" Draco said breathlessly after another bout of laughter.

The others laughed heartily at the memory, wiping the tears from their eyes.

Hermione smiled a little, and instead was remembering the time Fred and George Weasley had set off fireworks all over Hogwarts to make Umbridge crazy just before their showy exit from the school. She smiled a little wider, thinking of Harry and Ron. Then she thought of Cedric of how still needed to talk to him about what had *really* happened to her, and the smile disappeared.

The others carried on raucously and Hermione paid them no attention. She slowly sipped her Butterbeer in between clutching her bottle and staring into space. She tried to keep her mind blank by alternating concentrating on the label on her bottle and at the picture of a lake across the room.

Some time later, when her bottle was empty and her friends were moving on to more serious topics, the door to the Three Broomsticks opened and in walked Cedric. Alone.

He stared right at her and didn't look very happy. Her heart jumped in her throat and she looked quickly down at her hands which were

suddenly holding her Butterbeer bottle very tightly. Her knuckles slowly turned white and her hearts started pounding. She didn't remember to inhale or blink. The bats in her stomach were more like full-fledged Albatross.

She heard her friends greet him and ask him to join the table. He politely said hello, and that he would have to later. Then she felt his eyes on her.

"Hermione," he said, his tone extremely neutral. "I'd like to talk to you. Alone, if that's alright."

Ally stared with her eyebrows raised at Hermione, then Cedric. Pansy and Draco exchanged glances before Draco cleared his throat quietly.

Hermione reluctantly looked up, but didn't quite meet Cedric's eyes. "Sure." She said tightly and stood up robotically. She fumbled with her bottle inadvertently knocking it over. Ally caught it and offered a small smile.

Cedric was already heading out the door. Hermione followed, not looking at anywhere but where her feet were going. The next thing she knew, she was walking outside in the chilly, bleak weather a step behind Cedric. He seemed to have a specific destination in mind, so Hermione merely continued to follow.

Neither of them said a word until Cedric stopped at the fence near the Shrieking Shack. That's when she snapped out of her numbness and noticed the confusion and hurt on his face. She didn't know how to start a conversation with him at that moment, especially considering he was the one who wanted to talk to her.

She waited another moment before he finally spoke.

"It's not Quidditch, is it." He said, and it was a statement more than a question.

"What?"

“Why you’ve been acting all standoffish this past week. It has nothing to do with Quidditch, does it?” he turned his eyes to her and instead of the usual sparkling soft silver, they looked sharp grey.

Hermione stared back at him for a moment before shaking her head.

“I didn’t think so.” He said edgily. “What is it then?”

Hermione exhaled. This was it. That was the opening for her to explain. This was literally the moment of truth. She could not and would not back down with a lame excuse like before. She steeled herself to explain and even had her mouth open when Cedric asked,

“Is it me? Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong? Did I do something to upset you?”

“No, of course not!” she swiftly protested, irritated he had even asked. Then again, he had no reason not to assume the problem was him.

“Is it another guy? Because you were dating Draco all that time and I *knew* I should have never showed my interest – and then you were somehow different and - “ he sounded as angry with himself as he seemed to be at her. “It’s because I almost kissed you at the birthday party, isn’t it?”

“No!” she said loudly, nearly cutting him off. Again, she was very irritated he had even thought those things. And again, she silently admitted she’d given him no reason to think otherwise.

“Then what *is* it, then?” he prompted, crossing his arms over his chest.

Hermione took another deep breath and plunged head-first into her explanation without thinking and without giving him any time to jump in with anymore questions.

“At the start of the term, I made a wish on a wishing coin I’d found. I wished for everything to be different. The next morning I woke up to find everyone I knew to be in Slytherin, in the Gryffindor Common Room, and according to them, everything was normal and fine. I found that everyone I knew as Hufflepuff were now Ravenclaw and

Ravenclaw were Hufflepuff. My best friends were in Slytherin and knew me as nothing better than pond scum.”

She took another breath. Even though it'd happened a few weeks ago, the memory of the way Ron and Harry had treated her that day still stung. She couldn't read any emotion on Cedric's face as she continued speaking.

“This past month I've been working to reverse the wish to get back to what I know, all the while becoming more and more... attached to this world.” She gulped. This was going to be the hardest part. “You see, the thing is, in my world, the one I belong to, you're... you're gone. You don't exist. I can't fall in l – I c-can't be close to you, only to go back to where I can never be with you.” She quickly blinked back the tears threatening to overflow down her cheeks.

“That's why I've been avoiding you.” She finished quietly.

Cedric blinked and looked away, out to the Shrieking Shack in the distance. Hermione's gaze also landed on the crumbling old building, and she fleetingly thought of the night she, Harry and Ron had discovered Scabbers was actually Peter Pettigrew and that Sirius Black was actually Harry's godfather. In the next instant, she briefly wondered if the Shack was still named the Shrieking Shack in this alternate world.

Almost a full minute had gone by and Cedric was still staring at the Shack. Hermione nervously shifted from foot to foot, desperately wanting to know what was going through his mind.

“Ced?” She twisted her hands nervously and swallowed. “Say something.”

At that moment, he turned to her and she was deeply shocked by how angry he looked. His eyes were blazing and his mouth was set in a grim line. He looked furious, and yet the look of extreme hurt seemed to overshadow the anger by a mile.

“If you didn't want to be around me anymore, you could have just said so.” He said in a low, dangerous voice.

Hermione gaped in stunned silence as he pushed past her.

"If you wanted me to back off, you could have just asked me to!" he yelled over his shoulder.

"Cedric!" Hermione called.

He stopped to face her again. "You didn't need to spend so much time coming up with this bloody elaborate story to get me to leave you alone!" he shouted. "I'm a normal guy! 'Hey Ced, let's be friends' would have sufficed for me!"

Hermione could feel her own hurt and anger flaring at his reaction. Though she'd fretted and feared he might very well react in such a way, she'd believed deep down that he would end up being calm and understanding. He was going to smile and give her a hug and say he understood and believed her, even though it sounded crazy and unfathomable...

"I did think you were different, Hermione. Especially the past month." He shook his head. "Obviously I was wrong."

"You want to know what I was doing all this week while I was coming off cold?" Hermione was nearly shouting as well now. "I spent the whole week trying to gather the courage to tell you the ruddy truth, and here you are, flipping out, exactly like I knew you would."

"What do you mean, you 'knew I would'?" Cedric demanded.

"I had really hoped you wouldn't be angry – "

"With a sodding tall tale like that?" Cedric snorted in disgust. "How could I not be?"

"It's the truth!" Hermione insisted.

"Yes, I'm sure." He said sarcastically. "So I 'don't exist'? What is that supposed to mean? Does it mean I – "

“It means you’re dead!” Hermione burst out, furious tears blurring her vision. “You were *murdered*. So when I go back, all you’ll be is a tombstone and a coffin.”

Cedric stared at her. And for a split instant, she thought it was going to end right there. It was going to end up being alright after all. He could see how sincere she was being and how she was wiping the tears from her eyes. He would apologize and then so would she. Then she would go into detail about everything and it would all work out after all...

But it was only an instant.

For then his face contorted and he said disgustedly, “Where do you come *up* with this stuff?”

Hermione made a pained and exasperated noise before rubbing the rest of the tears from her eyes forcefully with her palms. “I did not make it up! I’ve been having terrible nightmares all week because of — “

“Yes, I’m *sure* you have, I don’t even want hear about them.” Cedric waved his hand dismissively and began huffily stalking away.

“So that’s it then?” she hollered after him.

“Yup!” he barked over his shoulder.

“Well, when I *do* go back, I know there’s one thing I’m definitely not going to miss after all!” She added an obnoxious “Hah!” to hit her jab home.

“Fine!” he bellowed.

“Fine!” she yelled.

Hermione stomped her foot hard on the ground and tramped several feet away from the fence. She frustratedly collapsed on a moss-covered log and made several “hmp” sounds, while trying to reassure herself that she had done the right thing. She didn’t need Cedric anyways, because she had Ron back where she belonged.

She, in fact, couldn't wait to get back and to think she had ever thought she had feelings for him. What a jerk. She would definitely, truly, *not* miss him when she returned to her time and place.

Of course, it didn't take long for those thoughts to run out, and admit to herself how completely untrue they all were. Then the tears finally came, splashing down across her cheeks and falling to her lap or her hands. She cried quite deeply and steadily for many minutes, knowing her heart was breaking, possibly beyond repair.

What she didn't know was that someone else's was too.

## **Chapter 17**

Hermione went straight back to the castle without stopping or letting anyone know where she was going. She assumed they would figure it out when she had not returned to the Three Broomsticks by the time they were ready to leave or if they ended up seeing Cedric without her.

After crying for so long on the log, she basically just felt numb. Sad and angry as well, but mostly chilled and numb. She didn't want to speak to anyone nor have anyone speak to her, so she kept her head down to avoid any questions about why her eyes were so red and puffy. She did not run so as to give the impression someone needed to chase after her or take notice of her, though she kept her pace extremely brisk. She wanted to get to the comfort of her bed as soon as possible.

Although it was barely late afternoon, when Hermione reached the dorms, she crawled miserably into bed pretty well as soon as she reached it. She pulled the hangings shut around her and clutched her pillow tightly to her chest, willing it to make things all better.

For quite some time she stayed like that, her thoughts swirling around in circles about the fight with Cedric. What she could have said better, why he got so angry, why hadn't she told him sooner, why did she like him so much, why couldn't he be alive where she belonged, why oh *why* had she ever made that stupid wish...

Eventually, she heard voices ascending the stairs to the dorm and recognized them as Pansy and Ally. They entered the room and immediately feel silent, seeing Hermione's bed hangings firmly shut. They exchanged worried glances before Ally ventured,

"Hermione? Everything ok?"

*Leave.* Hermione thought. *Please just leave me alone.*

When there was no reply, Pansy asked, in a voice equally as tentative as Ally's, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Still, Hermione remained silent.



“Are you coming down to dinner?” Ally questioned a second or two later.

Another moment of silence passed before Hermione croaked, “No. Please just go.”

“Are you sure?”

Hermione nodded even though her friends couldn’t see her. They must have understood her silent reply anyways, however, as Pansy moved towards the door saying,

“Well... alright then...” She shrugged. “We’ll bring you back something.”

“Just talk to us as soon as you’re ready, ok?” Ally said, following Pansy reluctantly out the dorm door.

The second they had gone, Hermione wished she had asked them to stay. At that moment, she was feeling exasperatedly complicated. The moment her friends had walked in the door, she’d asked them to leave and had only wanted to be left alone. The moment they were gone, she felt like calling them back just so she *wouldn’t* feel so alone. Her heart hurt so much from the fight with Cedric that she wanted to cry and scream. Yet she was glad because she knew she had to detach herself from this world that wasn’t hers to keep living in. She wanted so badly to see Ron – her Ron – and tell him how much she appreciates everything about him, and tell her Harry how glad she is to have him as a friend. But then why does the ache of wanting to see Harry and Ron get monstrously overpowered every time she thinks of Cedric?

She curled herself in a tighter ball, wishing she still had a wish left on the wishing coin. She wanted to go back to the beginning, where none of this had ever happened and she didn’t have to try and sort all these ridiculously contradicting feelings out and just concentrate on getting good grades and Christmas Holidays...

A few more tiny tears slid down Hermione’s cheeks and soaked into the extra pillow that she was not crushing against her chest.

Somehow she managed to doze off before Ally and Pansy returned from supper.

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The next day was Sunday and Hermione was eternally grateful not to have classes that day. She didn't think she was up to facing Cedric just yet. Nott had another Quidditch practice for Gryffindor scheduled, but Hermione opted out on account of feeling sick. Nott had raised his eyebrows skeptically until Pansy had so graciously mentioned that it was "a girl thing", accompanied by a significant look. Nott did not ask questions, but left early for practice rather hastily.

Hermione only ended up having breakfast after Ally and Pansy returned from their own and forced Hermione out of bed. When Hermione had finished eating the meager amount of food her friends had practically force-fed her, they convinced her to tell them exactly what happened.

"So then, he yelled 'Fine' and I yelled 'Fine' and..." Hermione took a breath as renewed tears splashed down her face like little rivers. She'd begun crying when she'd got to the part about how Cedric had been so disgusted with her for claiming he was "murdered" in her "world". "And then... he walked away."

Hermione crumbled and began crying all over again, and hating herself for it. She'd *never* cried this much and she felt pathetic for it, though she felt like she couldn't help it, because she'd liked him so much and now losing him the way she did hurt so bad.

Ally comfortingly patted her friend's back and tried to murmur reassuring words. Pansy rubbed Hermione's arm and had her head cocked to the side sympathetically.

Hermione tried desperately to gain control of herself and was unable to for quite some time. Every time she thought she her tears or the pain in her chest under control, some tiny thing would pop into her mind to remind her of the horrible fight and she'd start crying again. She *hated* this feeling of hurt and even more, hated the crying. She hated how she felt when she was done crying and hated how she felt while she was crying. She despised the fact that it was her crying and

she couldn't seem to make it stop when she wanted it to, though she sort of vowed she would get a hold of herself once and for all.

"It'll all work out in the end, Hermione." Ally soothed. "You'll see. Don't worry."

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On Monday, Hermione woke feeling rather miserable. When a tear or two slipped out and onto her cheek, she frustratedly wiped them away before she climbed out of bed.

*Enough of this ruddy crying. She thought. Get a bloody grip. You can get through this.*

Shakily she got ready and not once more did a tear slide out. She was completely determined to forget everything nice about Cedric Diggory, if not forget him altogether. Her mouth was set in a grim line as she headed down to the Common Room.

She dug deep and pulled out the Granger determination and courage that had gotten her through several rough situations in the past. She immediately thought of her first year when she, Ron and Harry had worked their way through the many obstacles set up by the Professors to protect the Philosopher's Stone. She allowed herself the tiniest of smiles as she snatched up the rest of things and made her way down to breakfast.

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At first, she continued to feel inwardly and understandably hurt and gloomy. Her friends continued to gaze at her with sympathy in their eyes, including Draco, Vinny and Greg who apparently must have heard what had happened from Ally and Pansy. Even so, they talked cheerily and naturally about everything, though careful to avoid any subject associated to Cedric or the fight. Hermione picked at her food, not joining in, but content to merely listen.

She looked up at one point, when she noticed Cedric entering the Great Hall. He looked defiant and detached, and when he caught Hermione looking at him, he raised his chin a little higher and decisively turned away.

Hermione straightened in her seat, a spark of anger flashing through her. *Fine.* She thought. *If that's the way you want to be about it... well, two can play at that game.*

Her demeanor changed instantly. She held her shoulders back firmly and quickly joined into the conversation between her friends wholeheartedly, feeling better in spite of herself. Her friends were a bit surprised and exchanged glances with each other, but happily accepted the abrupt shift in Hermione's mood and continued talking.

If any of them noticed Cedric scowling from his table or the way Hermione seemed to be trying too hard to make herself feel better, they didn't say anything.

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Since the day's classes (double Transfiguration with Slytherin and a Potions session with Hufflepuff) did not involve Ravenclaw, Hermione found it surprisingly easy to ignore and avoid Cedric. It was even easier to do so when he was "returning the favor" and going out of his way to avoid her, too.

The problem, was that during the past month that Cedric and Hermione had become close friends, his friends had become good friends with Hermione's friends.

Things became quite awkward after lunch when Ally and Hermione were heading to their second Transfiguration class while Cedric and his best friend Ewan were going off to their class, and Ewan stopped the girls to say hi to Ally.

Hermione refused to meet Cedric's eyes while he refused to acknowledge her as well. Hermione adamantly ignored the stinging feeling somewhere around her heart. When she spoke, it was directly to Ewan and Ewan only.

"Hello Ewan, how are you today?" she said.

He looked slightly uncomfortable and his eyes flicked very briefly to Cedric before he answered her question. "I'm doing alright. And how — "

"I'm *great*." Hermione said as emphatically as possible.

Cedric crossed his arms and though he looked hard at her for a moment, Hermione was decidedly looking anywhere else and missed the clear hurt and frustration in his eyes.

"How are *you*, Ally?" Cedric asked, in a nearly demanding tone.

Like Ewan, Ally glanced quickly at her friend before carefully and uneasily answering, "I'm fine, but – "

"I'm *perfect*." Cedric said much more firmly than necessary. "I have *never* been better." Though it was obvious to Ewan and Ally that Cedric's smile was quite forced, it wasn't to Hermione who felt a stab of emotional pain in her chest.

And though Ewan and Ally saw the unmistakable look of pain cross Hermione's features, Cedric didn't because he was gazing doggedly at anything but Hermione.

"Neither have I." said Hermione sharply, but quietly, causing Cedric's attention to snap to her. This time she stared right at him.

They both lifted their chins defiantly and tried to read the real emotions behind the other's angry masks. In a span of about four seconds, Ally and Ewan grew even more uncomfortable with the situation and concerned for their friends, while Hermione and Cedric replayed the fight in their minds as they stared at each other unblinkingly.

Hermione's eyes stung and she mentally forced her tears away.

Cedric swallowed guiltily and relaxed his stance.

Both looked like they were both about to say something, and before the situation could grow any worse, Ally and Ewan hastily intervened.

"Well, I hope you girls have a good day!" Ewan said loudly and nudged Cedric in the direction they'd previously been going before meeting up with the girls.

“Oh, and you too!” Ally tugged Hermione by the arm in the direction of the Transfiguration classroom. “See you ‘round!”

“Bye!” Ewan pushed and steered Cedric one way while Ally pulled and guided Hermione the other way.

After that, Ally shook her head and exhaled in relief. Hermione said absolutely nothing, truly unsure whether she wanted to thank or snap at Ally. Ally followed her friend’s lead and also said nothing, though she really didn’t know what to say either anyways.

Class began and it was its usual rottenness, accompanied by the usual unfair treatment from McGonagall and followed by the usual snide comments from the Slytherins. By now, Hermione was too used to it all to notice much, and cheered herself with the thought of completing the Wish Reversal potion and getting things back to normal.

She didn’t see Cedric once the rest of the day.

## **Chapter 18**

On Tuesday, things got worse.

Though they completely ignored each other before, during and after breakfast, and any time they passed each other in the halls, Charms class came along just before lunch and was quite unavoidable.

“Now, as you all know,” Flitwick bellowed across the room as he walked between desks handing out papers. “We’re going to be starting the first of this year’s major projects today.” A small, group groan went around the room which Flitwick pointedly ignored. “And, as you also know, you will be working in partners.”

Immediately, a wave of movement swept across the class as all the students shifted in their seats, pointed to each other, gave their friends significant glances, mouthing silently, or gesturing openly across the room or to the person sitting next to them – all the things students do when teachers announce you can work in partners.

Hermione clutched Ally’s arm hopefully, and Ally squeezed Hermione’s hand as she smiled and nodded.

Flitwick irritably cleared his throat very noisily, causing those nearest him and a few other students to jump at the sudden sound. “Don’t bother picking your partners, as I have picked them for you.”

Everyone groaned, louder this time, in disappointment and dismay or shook their heads sadly. Teachers always seem to have a knack for pairing you with someone who you’d rather have the flu than work on a project with. Ally rubbed her forehead apprehensively.

Flitwick cleared his throat loudly again and the room felt silent. “Against my better judgment, I have paired you with someone I think you will be happy working with. If the projects go well and turn out better while you are paired with a friend, you may be able to keep that partner for the next project.”

The students glanced at each excitedly this time, wondering who they could have possibly been paired with. Ally and Hermione smiled eagerly.

"If, however, you spend your time poorly, messing around and your project turns in a mediocre effort, you can very much expect you will *not* be working with the same person next time." Flitwick let his "threat" hang in the air as he retrieved a high-lighted piece of paper from his desk.

"Gregory Goyle, you will paired with Vincent Crabbe." Flitwick read as Greg and Vinny high-fived. "Pansy Parkinson, you will partner with Draco Malfoy. Ally Minstrel and Ewan Fletcher."

Ally seemed happy to be paired with Ewan, especially since she and Ewan had become quite friendly the past few weeks, but then she looked worriedly at Hermione, who was biting her lip nervously. If she wasn't paired with Ally, Pansy, Draco, Vinny or Greg, who was she going to be paired with? She refused to speculate much farther than the row in front of her, which included Theodore Nott and Millicent Bulstrode. Surely she'd be paired with one of them...

"Theodore Nott and Millicent Bulstrode." Flitwick read.

*Or not.* Hermione thought and kept her mind as blank as possible, focusing hard on the spot of missing paint on the back of Millicent's chair.

Flitwick continued down his list purposefully, momentarily disregarding the high-fiving, quiet exclamations, laughing and whispering going on. It seemed to take ages, and she was sure she must be absolutely last on the list by now, but finally Flitwick reached Hermione's name.

"Hermione Granger and Cedric Diggory."

*I knew it.* She thought bitterly as her shoulders sagged and she leaned forward on her desk, burying her face in her hands so no one saw how red her cheeks were at that moment. *It figures. The one time he'll decide to put us with someone we like and I'm stuck with the one person I don't want to speak to ever again.*

Ally rubbed Hermione's shoulder reassuringly. "Maybe now you guys can kiss and make-up."



Hermione shot her friend a scathing glare before returning her head to her hands.

Ally smirked, though Hermione didn't see. "It was just a friendly suggestion."

*Not that I wouldn't like to kiss and make-up.* Hermione thought glumly, with a touch of guilt.

Flitwick asked everyone to sit with their partners, which both Hermione and Cedric did with great reluctance. They sat as far apart as possible while still sitting at the same pair of desks.

The moment class had ended, Cedric shot out of his chair like he'd been scalded and made a beeline for Professor Flitwick. Hermione wondered if she should follow until she heard what Cedric asked. Then she was right beside Cedric at the teacher's desk just as fast.

"Sir, Hermione Granger and I strongly request different partners for this project." Cedric said.

Hermione nodded, hoping Flitwick would switch them with someone else, but at the same time praying he wouldn't and force them to stay together.

Flitwick adjusted the sizeable glasses resting on his large nose as he looked up from the paper he was writing on. "And why, exactly, is that?" he said, gazing quizzically at Cedric, then Hermione, and back again.

Hermione swallowed and her eyes flicked briefly to Cedric. Was he going to just tell the Professor the truth?

"Hermione Granger and I are not friends, sir." He said calmly and it stung Hermione, though she knew it was true. What also stung was the cold way he kept saying her first and last name together like that. "We therefore request different partners."

Flitwick studied Cedric and Hermione critically one at a time before replying a moment later. "Mr. Diggory," he sighed. "I do not wish to get involved in any way in your lover's spat."

Hermione ducked her head to stare at her shoes, feeling her cheeks grow suddenly very warm.

Cedric went rather pink and uneasily averted his own gaze away from Flitwick. "Sir, it's not a – "

"A lover's quarrel then." Flitwick cut in. "You two will have to work it out then." He stated as if it were the most simple thing in the world – which, in all truth, it really was – before going back to his paper.

"But Professor – " Cedric started, his eyes on Flitwick's shining bald head.

"That's quite enough, Mr. Diggory." Flitwick said firmly without looking up. "Even if I decided to grant your wish and put you and Miss Granger with other people, I would have to break up a pair who *is* happy to work together, which isn't entirely fair."

"Professor, I – " Cedric tried again, but was again talked over authoritatively.

"*Good day*, Mr. Diggory." Flitwick said sharply, indicating clearly that there was no room for any argument. He looked up this time, if only to glare sternly at them. "This discussion is quite over, sir." He paused, turned to Hermione and inclined his head slightly. "Miss Granger."

She nodded and walked back over to her desk to retrieve her things. Cedric stalked past her and began gathering his things in a rush. Hermione bit her lip, feeling like she should say something, but had no idea what.

"Ced, I – " She began, but he snatched up the remainder of his things and was out the door before she got a third word out.

Hermione stared after him for a moment before slowly following.

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The rest of the week passed quite similarly. Hermione and Cedric continued to avoid each other as much as possible. Hermione shot Cedric guilty glances when she knew he wasn't looking, and unbeknownst to her, he did the same. Ally encouraged Hermione

often to just *talk* to Cedric, and a few times Hermione even plucked up the courage to do so. However, she would then see him and the angry scene in Hogsmeade would flash in her mind, causing her to swallow and forget her words and turn around to go somewhere else.

On Wednesday they had another Charms class, which was spent mostly with Flitwick dictating the details of the project and the students feverishly taking notes. Cedric was once again out the door the door before Hermione even had a chance to speak a single word to him.

Thursday, she barely saw him at all, even in passing, though excluding meals. Gryffindor had no classes with Ravenclaw that day and Hermione spent the evening catching up on homework in the Common Room with her friends.

Friday, Gryffindor attended Care of Magical Creatures with Ravenclaw, and Hermione kept a good distance between herself and Cedric the entire time, not once meeting his eyes. At the end of the class, it was Hermione instead who was the one to rush away before a word could be spoken. Cedric had stared after her, regretting once again not being able to say anything to her, and yet still not possessing the courage to say anything anyways.

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It was Saturday when things became quite “interesting”.

The day started out normal enough, with Hermione having breakfast with her friends as usual. Afterwards, they left the Great Hall and began ascending the Grand Staircase, again, as usual. When they’d barely stepped onto the second floor, there was a spectacular crash from above, punctured by some yells of pain, shouts of surprise, more loud noises, a few hard thumps, another deafening crash, followed by a handful more very loud thumps.

“What in the world...?” Hermione and her friends jogged up the stairs after other groups of nearby students who were dashing up to the third floor, where all the noise had finished.

It turns out, that Hufflepuff Captain and Chaser, Roger Davies, had been helping Professor Muggleby move some particularly massive

and hefty volumes about translating Ancient Runes from the Ancient Runes classroom on the sixth floor, back down to the library on the fourth floor.

Just as he'd reached the fifth floor, two things happened. The first, was that Roger had been foolish enough to think he could take several volumes at once and therefore could not see anything except the thick, dusty book spines pressing into his face. He stumbled a bit, causing his already precarious load to begin to spill. The second, which was much more unfortunate and important, was that the staircase which Roger had been about to step on to, decided to move, obviously realizing this was a highly inconvenient moment to do such a thing.

In an attempt to not drop his load, Roger tried to lean back and bring his right arm up to slap on top of the books and try and stabilize them. This was rather unwise as it only resulted in the heavy books abruptly having no support on their right side and started falling that way instead. Had Roger been able to suddenly sprout a third arm, he likely would have been able to stop the following catastrophe.

Roger felt the books begin to spew out to the right, so he quickly leaned forward and brought his arm back down to fix this problem and catch them. He gasped in horror as he lost his balance and pitched forward into the empty space where the staircase should have been.

He'd let out sort of strangled cry and not surprisingly, stopped trying to hold onto the books and prevent them from falling or hitting the floor. Roger did his best to twist around in a split second so he could land more or less on his feet.

He fell from the fifth floor to the fourth floor, where he was "saved" from plummeting anymore by another staircase. His fall and landing severely started several students on that staircase who'd just been heading down to breakfast.

Roger landed more or less on his feet, one could say, as it was indeed his feet that hit first, and there was a terrible crack. His knees, chest, head, shoulders and hands followed extremely fast, in that order. All of this together created the first spectacular crash.

Since he'd landed on stairs and had a lot of inertia to overcome before he'd be able to stop, a split second after his hands painfully smacked the marble, poor Roger tumbled heels over head down the rest of the stairs, yelping as he gathered injuries. He came to a final massive crash against the wall at the beginning of the third floor.

Several bulky volumes about translating Ancient Runes came falling, spinning, thudding, colliding, hurtling, or bouncing after Roger, which explained the loud noises and hard, noisy thumps. Roger had groaned very loudly and passed out. A girl nearby who couldn't stand the site of blood, shrieked and also passed out.

Five or so Professors came running, pushing and literally elbowing their way through the huge throng of gathered students about half a minute later. They hurriedly put him on a stretcher and sped him off to the Hospital Wing. Two teachers worked together to take the fainted girl along to the Hospital Wing also.

Less than an hour later, Nott had called an emergency Quidditch meeting and practice.



Just after lunch, Hermione was on her way into the library with Ally and Pansy when Cedric and Ewan were just coming out. Hermione was still in a cheerful mood and nearly said 'hi' to the pair. But then she caught the stony look Cedric was giving her and couldn't believe a little Quidditch had taken her mind off of things so fully.

Before she could decide whether to say anything at all or not, Cedric spoke first.

"Heard about Roger, I suppose?" he said in the most neutral tone one could imagine.

Since he had not said a word to her in nearly four days, Hermione couldn't help but be taken aback and think of this as an improvement. When she answered, however, she did so in a tone as flat as Cedric's had been.

"Of course." She said. "Ally and I were barely a flight of stairs down when it happened."

"He's one of my good friends, you know."

"I'm sorry he was hurt."

Cedric nodded curtly and then said, "Then I also suppose you know that Gryffindor is now playing Ravenclaw next Saturday?"

Hermione nodded slowly, unsure of where this conversation was going.

Ewan glanced unsurely between his friend and Ally, who looked equally uncomfortable.

"I suppose you think your team will win, then?" Cedric no longer sounded painfully neutral, but rather suddenly on edge.

"Well, yes, but – " The moment the words had left her mouth, Hermione realized the problem. *Cedric* was on the Ravenclaw team. *She* was on the Gryffindor team. And excluding the current exchange going on, they weren't on speaking terms.

*So much for a diplomatic answer to that question.* Hermione thought and silently scolded herself for not realizing sooner. Quidditch rivalry was about to make the rift between her and Cedric grow even deeper.

Cedric lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes a bit. "You do realize you can't make up stories to help you win and get your way in a sporting event, don't you?" He didn't know what made him say it, but it just came out before he could stop it and he immediately regretted it.

Hermione opened her mouth a bit in shock. In the short time she'd gotten to know Cedric, she never thought he was the one to dish out low remarks like that.

That was the last straw.

"It was the truth!" Hermione said, her voice rising emotionally. "I liked you enough to tell you the truth! Doesn't that count for something? You say you value honesty, so instead of *lying* to you and then disappearing from your life, I tell you the truth and try to explain it so you can understand and you blow up in my face like I'm stark-raving mad and just use the most outrageous tales I can possibly come up with to deeply hurt other people."

Cedric lowered his chin and his eyes softened. "Hermione – "

She plowed on overtop of him. "And I have wanted to work things out the entire week. Every time I think I have the guts to talk to you and try to better explain, you give that awful look and my words crumble to pieces so I end up saying nothing."

Cedric pressed his lips into a thin line, truly unsure how to react.

"I'm done." Said Hermione. "If you hate me that much because I valued your friendship enough to be honest with you, *fine*. I'm done trying to fix this." She took a steadying breath before adding solemnly, "Good luck in the game. You're going to need it."

She turned on her heel away down the hall, ignoring her original idea of hanging out in the library with her friends. She didn't once look back or slow down.



Ally winced and gave Ewan a feeble wave and an “I’m sorry” look before grabbing Pansy’s elbow and hurrying after Hermione.

Ewan eyed his friend warily before wisely talking about anything but what he had just witnessed. He was talk seriously about that later.

Cedric nodded or shook his head appropriately while his eyes stayed stuck on his feet or the patterns on the floor. As he and Ewan made their way to the Ravenclaw Common Room, Cedric could not stop thinking about Hermione and her words.

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As if her could get worse, it did. On her way to her potion’s room, Hermione met (who else) but Slytherin Harry and Ron. They were already sneering and jeering loudly before she neared.

“Well! Look who it is.” Harry said.

“Shove off and rot.” Hermione said sharply and continued speedily on her way.

Harry and Ron seemed actually surprised by the anger in her remark and by the time they’d come up with some form of a comeback, Hermione had already rounded the corner.

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She’d barely been tending to her potion for five minutes when there was an insistent tapping at the window. Startled by the sudden noise, Hermione whipped her head around to see what had caused it.

On the outer windowsill was a large rather non-descript brown owl holding a long flat package. Curious and confused, Hermione let the owl in and removed the bundle form it’s leg.

Upon opening the package, Hermione found a letter addressed to her and two large, glossy photographs. One was a neat-looking picture of Sirius Black as the lead singer of the Weird Sisters, on stage at some

flashy concert dressed in all black, his fist in the air. It was signed, *"To Pansy, Keep rockin'!"* followed by Sirius' large signature.

The other was a very nice photo of Sirius from about the chest up. He was wearing a tight red t-shirt that read, "I'm famous" in white print, and his hair was cut shorter than Hermione had personally ever seen it. He was smiling a killer grin that made Hermione's flutter. She laughed at her own reaction and read that this one was signed for Ally. It read, *"To Ally, Stay awesome!"* and was also followed by Sirius' signature.

Hermione set the photos aside, knowing her friends would be overjoyed. Just the other day they were telling her just how hard it was to get autographs of Sirius Black, though in recent weeks he'd been suddenly very out and about with his fans. Hermione had said nothing but smiled to herself, guessing the Sirius "now" was "her" Sirius.

She smiled again, thinking of that all over, and then opened the letter that had come with the photos with her name on the front. It read,

*"Dear Hermione,*

*Happy belated birthday! I'm glad you had fun.*

*I sent photos for your friends, as requested. I hope your friends will like them, though by your descriptions, I bet they will love them, ha ha.*

*My concert did go well, actually – more or less. I just about had a nervous breakdown before the show, because I have never touched a guitar in my entire life let alone play one well enough to be in band. Of course, to "comfort" me, my band member kept telling me I was one of the best, if not the best. I tried to warn them I was not feeling myself, and that things wouldn't go well today, but they continued to reassure me that I would be fine.*

*So it was show time and they practically had to shove me on stage. I was panicked and sweating and as the other guys started playing the music, they looked at me strangely. I swallowed and strummed randomly on the guitar hoping for a miracle. I got one, Hermione, I definitely got one. When my fingers touched the guitar, I was shocked*

*to see and feel and know that my fingers seemed to know where to go. I just... knew what I was doing. I knew the words to the songs, I knew when I was supposed to play and how to play! It was the most amazing thing in the world. I really felt like part of the band.*

*Afterwards when I tried to explain this to the guys, they laughed and had a great joke and thought I must be drunk. They couldn't understand why I was so shocked and relieved that I could actually play the guitar after all.*

*I forgot to mention the part of being on stage. Performing was such an adrenaline rush. It was totally exhilarating, amazing, freeing... I absolutely loved doing that concert. I wish I could keep doing this forever.*

*Anyways, I managed to get away for a day or two and made my way up to Hogsmeade as Snuffles on the twenty-seventh. It wasn't until I got there I realized we hadn't decided on a meeting place or time, so after looking around a bit, I tried hanging out at that spot where Harry, Ron and you met me that one time. Guess I missed you, though. When's the next weekend?*

*Lastly, I wanted to let you know I dug up a few more facts about people, most of which I think will interest you.*

*My cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange is a – wait, are you sitting down? All drinks out of reach and on a flat surface? Are you truly ready for this? I got a letter from her the other day and found out that she's a nun."*

*Hermione re-read that line and burst out laughing. The image of the evil Bellatrix dressed in a nun's humble outfit was such an outrageous one. It was nearly a full minute before she had gained her composure enough to read on.*

*"I know, I know. If you're laughing your head off, know I was laughing so hard I was in tears for several minutes. In fact I actually fell out of my chair. Finally I was able to continue reading her letter. Her and that occupation though... it's completely weird.*

*My brother, Regulus, teaches Kindergarten to wizard children whose parents want them to get a little schooling before they go to Hogwarts.*

*I almost died laughing when I found that out. Nothing could be farther from the truth about Regulus.*

*I think you'll get a kick out of this next one. Remember old Barty Crouch? That tight-lipped old fellow during the Triwizard Tournament?"*

Hermione grimaced. How could she forget? Not only because he was such a staunch old man, but also because he was found murdered at the edge of the Forbidden Forest in their fourth year.

*"This is another one you should be sitting down for. Well, about a week or so ago my agent dragged me over to the Ministry on some business or something, and while I was in the lobby, this total hippie – decked out in huge baggy pants, tie-dye rainbow t-shirt, beads, necklaces, bracelets, rings, dreadlocks, headband and sunglasses – saunters up and says he's here to see his son, Barty Crouch Jr. The receptionist rolled her eyes and made some comment about how wasn't he much too old for that get-up? Old Barty pretty much ignored her, other than saying 'Peace Sister', before heading – no, swaggering – on his way. I stared without blinking until my agent elbowed in the ribs.*

*Anyways, long enough letter? I'd better let you go. Talk to you soon, Hermione!*

*Sincerely, Sirius."*

Still smiling, Hermione grabbed her quill and a piece of parchment to scratch down a reply. Her quill hovered above the paper and she blinked several times before her smile slowly disappeared. She sat back and her shoulders sagged.

Here was the same problem she was having with Cedric. She cared about Sirius, obviously not romantically of course, but cared nonetheless. Here he was, alive and happy. As soon as she returned to her real time and world, Sirius would be gone, murdered by his cousin Bellatrix.

Hermione sighed heavily and briefly buried her head in her hands. How many times was she going to be forced to remember this world

could not be? How many times was she going to ask herself why she couldn't have both? And how many times was she going to wish she had *never* made the wish that started it all?

When she looked up at her parchment after a moment or two, it was with great reluctance. She stared at the paper for quite some time, wondering what to say. She did not want to admit it, but she knew what she had to do.

Finally, she brought her quill down and wrote down a reply to Sirius' letter.

*"Dear Sirius,*

*Thanks for the pictures. I'm sure Pansy and Ally will adore them. Glad everything is well.*

*Sincerely, Hermione”*

She winced at her letter's shortness and formality. She didn't know how Sirius was going to react to it, but considering how long it had been taking him to get around to writing her letters, with any luck her potion would be complete and she'd be on her way back before Sirius' reply reached her. That made her feel guilty and relieved at the same time.

Hermione gave her letter to the owl who'd kindly waited behind for reply. It nodded and hooted softly before leaving through the window it had come in.

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## **Chapter 20**

Over the next week or so, Hermione reluctantly did what she knew she had to do. She began to participate with her friends less and less. She chose to sit alone or with someone else besides her friends in class. Her spare time she devoted to Quidditch when the pitch was available, her potion, or her homework.

Though she believed she was doing the right thing by slowly distancing herself from her friends, it hurt even more inside when she uncomfortably refused her friends' requests, as she could see they were upset and concerned by her sudden withdrawal. By "severing her ties", as she silently referred to it, Hermione told herself she was actually saving herself some pain. It hurt now, to be sure, but she was just as sure it hurt far less now than if she let herself get truly and deeply attached to these people. The people she couldn't be attached to in her real world.

The worst moment in this endeavor came on Thursday, when Ally finally managed to corner her after class.

"Hey, what's going on with you this week?" she asked, her features creased with worry. "You've been acting really off."

"Have I?" Hermione said distractedly and tried to push past her friend. She was mentally counting how many days until her Potion would be ready, which assignments were due the next day, what Theodore had said she needed to work on during their last practice, and reminding herself which books she had intended to pick up from the library that evening.

Ally grabbed Hermione's arm. "What's going on?" she asked firmly.

Hermione made the mistake of looking Ally in the eye. She was flooded with guilt immediately and said quietly, "Nothing." She winced at her obviously fake answer.

Ally didn't let go of her friend's arm. "Look, Hermione, whatever it is, you can tell me. I'll understand. I have so far, with everything that's happened." She paused before adding pleadingly, "Please."

Hermione dropped her eyes for a moment and bit her lip. "Not this time." She whispered.

Ally's eyebrows moved together in confusion. "But – "

"Just please leave me alone." Hermione pulled away, feeling ashamed of herself, and joined the throng of students traveling down the hall. She didn't need to look back to see Ally's face to know how upset the other girl was by Hermione's words.

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Finally it was Saturday, the day of the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. Hermione's stomach was in knots, not only because it was her first big match, but also because she was playing against Cedric. If anything could possibly make things between them worse, it was sure to be a Quidditch match. After all, one of them had to lose.

Just as Hermione was leaving the Great Hall after breakfast to head out to the pitch, Dumbledore stopped her.

"Miss Granger, may I have a private word with you?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

They moved off down the Hall a bit, away from other students before Dumbledore studied her critically from behind half-moon spectacles. Hermione shifted uncomfortably, wondering what this was all about and feeling as though she'd been placed under a microscope.

"Is everything alright, Miss Granger?" he said at last.

"Er, yes..." Hermione said unsurely.

"Is there anything you wish to tell me? Anything at all?" he smiled crookedly. "I'm a good listener."

Hermione racked her brain confusedly for a moment. "No, sir, I don't believe so."

"You're potion is going well?"

Hermione nodded.

Dumbledore hesitated before speaking again. "You are sure everything is alright?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer but also hesitated. *No, everything is not alright.* She thought and immediately the faces of Cedric, Ally, Ron, and the rest of her friends came to mind. *Nothing at all.*

She swallowed and replied evenly, "Yes. Everything is fine."

Dumbledore nodded, though he seemed slightly disappointed or concerned by her answer. Before she could tell which, however, his features rearranged into a kind smile. "Good luck today." He said.

"Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore bowed his head a tiny bit before departing.

Hermione didn't understand why that conversation had just taken place, but she would have to think about it later. For now, she needed to get to the pitch.

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It seemed far too soon before Hermione was standing with her team, dressed in fresh crimson Quidditch robes, clutching her broom so tight her hand hurt. Her heart was pounding and she was trembling all over with nerves.

"You alright there, Hermione?" Millicent, on Hermione's right, asked.

Hermione swallowed hard, unable to speak, and nodded.

Vinny, on her left, half-smiled. "You're acting like this is your first game."



Hermione glanced sideways at him and almost blurted, "It is." She caught herself just in time, though, and instead merely nodded a second time.

Neither Millicent or Vinny seemed to notice.

"For my first game, I nearly passed out from nerves." Millicent commented. "I didn't, luckily. Managed to walk onto the pitch. After that, everything was fine."

*This is completely different.* thought Hermione. *You have no idea...*

"Just take deep breaths, if you are nervous." Vinny advised.

"It helps." Millicent agreed. "And don't worry too much about this game. It's only the first game of the season. If we lose, we lose."

"That's right." Vinny added. "We'll have lots of time to catch up."

The pair of them smiled reassuringly at Hermione, who mumbled out a small "thanks", though she doubted they'd heard her, for at that moment, the large doors leading onto the pitch were thrown open with a loud bang. Her team stepped forward onto the soft grass and were met with deafening cheers. She could see the Ravenclaw team exiting their locker room on the other side of the pitch.

*It sure doesn't seem this loud when you're in the stands!* Hermione thought.

Looking up at the stands filled to capacity with students, Hermione couldn't help but feel very, very small and out in the open. She hurriedly averted her focus from the crowd to mounting her broom and following her team into the air.

"Formation!" Madame Hooch said cheerily. Hermione did a double take, hardly recognizing the Quidditch teacher. She had fiery red hair down to her waist which had been woven in a tight French braid. She was slimmer and younger looking, too. But there was no missing those unmistakable yellow eyes. "Come along now, formation!"



## **Chapter 21**

Hermione let Theodore race up to reach the Quaffle first as they'd practiced. He luckily beat Ravenclaw's forward Chaser, Zacharias Smith, to the ball, though it was a very close shave. Theodore was able to snatch it out of the air and throw it straight down to Millicent who was waiting very near the ground for the pass. She caught it deftly and raced forward, skimming the grass of the pitch with her feet. As two of the Ravenclaw Chasers swiftly took after Millicent, she leaned forward on her broom and accelerated across the pitch.

Hermione concentrated on her part in this play and raced towards Ravenclaw's goal hoops. She was a little behind and far above Millicent. Theodore was on her left, pushing hard for the goalposts, with the third Ravenclaw hot on their heels.

Then, all at once, Theodore was less than ten feet from the far right goal and began waving his arms madly at Millicent. The Ravenclaw flew over to "cover" Theodore. Hermione was roughly fifteen feet or so from the middle goal and was watching Millicent intently.

Abruptly, Millicent leaned straight back on her broom so she was practically in a lying down position – one which she'd gathered a score of bruises mastering during practice sessions – effectively bringing her to an almost immediate stop without lurching off her seat. The two Ravenclaw players who'd been chasing after Millicent shot past her, not expecting her to brake so suddenly.

Before the other players could recover, and as the Ravenclaw Keeper was anticipating Millicent's next move, Millicent sat up instantly and threw the Quaffle hard up to Hermione. Without thinking, but letting her muscles remember the moves she'd painstakingly done over and over again until she'd gotten them right, Hermione caught the ball. In one quick motion that took up the same amount of time as two blinks of an eye, she swung her arm around in a throw reminiscent of an Ancient Greek discus athlete, and sent the Quaffle hurtling through the far right hoop.

Though the Ravenclaw Keeper very valiantly dove for the ball, he'd anticipated Millicent's move quite wrong, thinking she was going to throw to Theodore as he was much closer to a goal. The Keeper

completely missed and was unable to stop the Quaffle from flying right through the unguarded hoop.

The Gryffindors, and those rooting for them, let loose a tumultuous cheer, while the Ravenclaws and their supporters groaned and booed.

Hermione shouted and whooped happily that their play had worked as Millicent and Theodore flew over to pat her and each other on the back.

“I did it!” she said, grinning from ear to ear. “Did you see that? It worked! We did it!”

Theodore laughed. “Of course it worked. Graham’s a master at Quidditch plays. But that’s only one goal, Hermione. We have a whole game to go yet.”

Hermione nodded and glanced over at her other team mates to see how they were doing. Instead of spotting Draco, however, she saw Cedric. He was gazing moodily around the pitch, his jaw clenched tight. She looked away and forced her mind back into the game unfolding before her.

After that, the pace picked up a bit, but still went fairly well. Hermione found this strange, wonderful sense of focus, energy and calm while she played. It was a totally different feeling than the one she got during practice, and this one blocked out everything except the other players. Though she lost track of time and score often because she wasn’t playing close attention to the commentary (which was being done by Lisa Turpin, Millicent informed Hermione) she was still having an amazing time. She’d never felt so included and free and yet somehow not in control... it was perfectly glorious in an unexplainable way that she could never, ever have learned from a book. She finally understood why Harry and Ron would rather breathe Quidditch than air. For her however, as much as she was fast falling in love with Quidditch, *nothing* could ever replace a good book.

Both Gryffindor and Ravenclaw played smart and full of strength and energy, getting a handful of goals in each. There were two time outs called during the game – one by either Captain – in which Graham encouraged his team ferociously in an Oliver Wood-esque way, and

reviewed which plays he wanted them to use in the next part of the game.

Finally, about two and a half hours after the match began, and Gryffindor was only twenty points ahead, the Seekers spotted the Snitch. They blasted off simultaneously to pursue and catch it.

“Malfoy! SNITCH!” Graham yelled unnecessarily.

Hermione held her breath and tried desperately not to watch the Seekers. She was currently following Theodore, who had the Quaffle under his arm, and she was also trying to keep a very annoyingly persistent Zacharias Smith from getting past her to take down Theodore.

The tension and noise level of the crowd escalated and Hermione guessed that one or both of the Seekers must be very close. When the noise level climaxed suddenly, nearly deafening Hermione, she could no longer focus on her task and whipped around to see who had caught the Snitch. The instant she laid eyes on the winner was the same instant that his name was blasted into the microphone by an ecstatic Lisa Turpin.

“He’s done it! Diggory has caught the Snitch! Right *there*, just barely before Malfoy, right in front of him!” she was fairly squealing. “Well *done*! Final score stands one-hundred and ninety to sixty, Ravenclaw. *Great* game, everybody. Perfectly top drawer!”

The players came in for a landing on the patchy green and brown ground. The Ravenclaws rushed over to thank and congratulate their Seeker, while the Gryffindor made their way to theirs to console and reassure him.

Hermione stared at her feet and walked quickly straight to the locker room, fighting back tears. It wasn’t that it hurt this bad to lose, though it of course did sting. It was more the way Cedric was currently holding the Snitch high for the world to see, bouncing and laughing among his team members. She didn’t know what she had been expecting to happen, but this wasn’t it. She’d somehow imagined that if Cedric won, he’d rush over and take her in his arms to apologize.

And she would forgive him and everything would just be like it was before she'd told him the truth...

She had managed not to imagine him standing tall in the ring of admiring teammates, still waving the Snitch triumphantly and grinning a little too smugly. For some reason, she had never, not once, thought that Cedric would ever look at her so arrogantly then when she'd met his eye as she'd walked past Draco. The message in his eyes so clearly seemed to read, "You *lost*. So *there*."

Maybe she should have guessed or imagined that these things had a possibility of occurring. But she hadn't, and it hurt that much more.

---

Cedric was sitting on the bench in the Ravenclaw locker room as the last of his team cleaned up and changed. It had been nearly an hour since the end of the match and now Cedric was the only one still in his sweaty Quidditch robes.

"Why so glum, chum?" Jenny Cadwallander, one of Ravenclaw's Chasers, came out of the girl's showers and bathrooms in fresh, clean clothes, towel drying her hair. "We won, you know."

Cedric didn't respond or acknowledge her.

"I said, 'we won, you know'."

When Cedric still didn't reply, Jenny eyed him with concern.

"Is everything alright, Ced?" she asked.

"Fine." He finally spoke, though very quietly.

"Did you... want to talk about it?" Jenny offered kindly and then paused. "Because they say talking is good."

"I said I was fine." He said more loudly and firmly.

"Okay then." Jenny gathered her things uncomfortably. "I was only trying to help." She exited the locker room a few moments later.

Cedric sighed and felt a stab of guilt. He shouldn't have been short with Jenny. She was only being a friend.

He slowly buried his head in his hands. Over the past week or two, a small pressure had been growing steadily on his mind. He knew exactly what it was, but he'd doggedly ignored it. Though during the game he'd managed to forget about it, afterwards, he could ignore it no longer.

It was guilt. Lots of it.

He'd only had this same feeling one other time in his life. He'd been seven years old and had managed to break his mother's favorite glass lamp in the living room. It had been an accident, but it'd also been one that should have been avoided. Cedric was strictly told not play floor hockey in the house, least of all the living room. But his parents had been out and he'd been so tempted to just try it once. The result of a badly aimed puck was the broken lamp. Cedric had worriedly hid all evidence of his forbidden Muggle hockey escapade, and waited for his parents to come home. He explained calmly but in a very upset manner that it'd been his magic, that he hadn't been able to control it, and he was very sorry. His parents had readily believed him, as such things had happened before.

Then this terrible pressure grew in Cedric's mind every day after that, until it became literally unbearable. One day while his mother was making supper, Cedric burst in, clamped onto her leg and spilled out the true story between his tears. He'd been so guilty and ashamed that his parents didn't have much heart to punish him as harshly as he probably deserved, especially considering Cedric himself locked his hockey things in the garage for outside and garage use only, and had made it a point to be as honest as possible from there on.

Even so, he'd had bouts of guilt or shame, or times of lying, though in much smaller measures. That guilt and shame was eating at him again, a massive shadow and weight in his mind, though this time not for lying about a broken lamp.

This one was because he was finally realizing he was wrong. And though he'd always tried hard to stand for truth, he'd recently condemned someone for being brave enough to tell it to him.

The images of her and the internal pain, just behind her eyes, and her hollow smiles, were burned in his mind. On top of that, his and her words seemed to echo loudly all around him whenever that guilt and shame abruptly pushed to the surface.

*You see, the thing is, in my world, the one I belong to, you're... you're gone. You don't exist. I can't fall in l- I c-can't be close to you, only to go back to where I can never be with you.*

He had been convinced she was trying to harshly blow him off. Humiliate him, even. The Hermione he had known months before had not been above using elaborate excuses to get out of things – dates and guys being her specialty, it seemed.

Then she had turned up one day, a hundred and eight degrees different, looking frightened and grief-stricken. He'd always had a small crush on Hermione, though he knew nothing would ever, ever come of it. But suddenly she was so changed! His crush had intensified tenfold and quickly turned into something much more. She was so wonderful...

And then she abruptly started avoiding him. He had hoped she would give him a valid excuse, though his cynical side whispered often enough to nearly convince him that she *hadn't* changed after all. It was just another complex act.

She'd told him that outrageous story about the alternate universe and the wishing coin not too long after, and his hope that she was different had vaporized faster than steam. He had never felt angrier than he did at that moment.

*You didn't need to spend so much time coming up with this bloody elaborate story to get me to leave you alone!*

He brooded for days, berating himself for not seeing it sooner. He ran their fight through his mind endlessly. Ewan kept trying to cheer him up in any way possible, but it always came back to the fight.

*So I 'don't exist'? What is that supposed to mean? Does it mean I –*



*It means you're dead! You were murdered. So when I go back, all you'll be is a tombstone and a coffin.*

Yet doubt lingered. And it had finally grown and merged with his guilt, which was now crashing down all together on him at once, forcing him to look the truth straight in the face.

Had Hermione not had her odd moments? Had he not heard others talking about the radical change in her? Bits of things he overheard Ally offhandedly say to Ewan?

One day in passing, Cedric had caught Cho Chang telling one of her friends that Hermione Granger had *forgotten* what the D.A. was. Cedric had been confused by that comment, but brushed it off and forgot about it.

He, among other students, had noticed just how sad and strangely disoriented Hermione had seemed during the first week of school or so. In his anger, Cedric had dismissed that as being very good acting. But what if it hadn't been, and she really was disoriented and sad because she'd left an entire world behind by accident?

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more things he could come up with to *support* Hermione's fantastic tale rather than contradict it. He could suddenly think of many examples:

Their first Hogsmeade weekend together...

*After we came back, I got to go to the Weasley's for a weekend or two. It was really fun.*

*Sorry, did you just say you went to the Weasley's for a weekend?*

*Uh, no. I said – uh – Minstrel's. Ally's.*

The one and only study session they'd ever manage to schedule, and how strange that had been...

*Remember, when I was in second year, how the Chamber of Secrets was opened? That was scary times... I was petrified by the Basilisk.*

*I'd just figured out that seeing its reflection petrifies you - because we knew looking directly at it killed you –*

*What? Chamber of Secrets? A Basilisk in the school? Never! What –*

*Yes, I remember it was Mrs. Norris first, then Colin Creevey - annoying little first year, he was - and Nearly Headless Nick –*

*Nearly - what? Who!*

*- and then Justin Flinch-Fletcher. Of course everyone thought poor Harry did it because he was a Parseltongue. And after that awful business with Ginny and Riddle in the Chamber - well, Ron and Harry told me all about it after of course -*

*What - are - you - talking - about?*

*...I-I... someday. Someday I'll tell you.*

*Then that one day he'd been nearby as Ewan and Ally talked...*

*That's a bit far out there, wouldn't you say? Ewan had said skeptically.*

*I agree, it is. Ally replied. But you should have seen her! Ewan, honestly, no one, can fake the way she was. I mean, she was best friends with Potter, and huge enemies with Draco, and she's had to completely reverse her thinking!*

*Still though... a coin that grants a wish by accident? I just don't –*

*I've seen it, Ewan.*

*You... have?*

*Then they'd both broken off and hurriedly changed the subject when they noticed Cedric was within earshot.*

*Excellent! Well! I'll be going now! Thanks for the, er...*

*No problem Ally! See you, er, later!*

His words to her the day after their study session, as he prodded her to explain what she'd been talking about with Near-headed Nick (or whatever it was), stuck out particularly painfully.

*You wouldn't believe me, Cedric. You really wouldn't.*

*Sure I will! How crazy can it be? ...Please tell me. I want to know. I will believe you.*

*Someday.*

That 'someday' had been their next Hogsmeade weekend together, and he had thrown her words right back at her.

*You want to know what I was doing all this week while I was coming off cold? I spent the whole week trying to gather the courage to tell you the ruddy truth, and here you are, flipping out, exactly like I knew you would.*

*What do you mean, you 'knew I would'?*

*I had really hoped you wouldn't be angry –  
With a sodding tall tale like that? How could I not be?*

*It's the truth!*

*Yes, I'm sure.*

It hit him now, though, like a sledge hammer to the gut, as all the evidence and memories cascaded down on top of him. He thought he was being stupid about her before, but she'd just been telling the truth.

The truth.

*I liked you enough to tell you the truth! Doesn't that count for something?*

His heart sped up and he wasn't sure why. He sat very still, his breath quiet and slow, not blinking, his emotions and thoughts dashing and bouncing chaotically around his mind like laser beams.

*Doesn't it count for something?*

Finally Cedric blinked and his mind stopped racing. He was going to fix this. And as much as it was going to kill him to wait, he knew when the right moment would be to do so.

*...count for something?*

“Yes, Hermione, it does.”

## **Chapter 22**

“Are you coming?”

Hermione pretended not to hear, but her cheeks colored, giving her away. So instead of continuing to act like she hadn't heard, she belatedly mumbled, “No.”

Ally sighed in exasperation. “Not again! How long are you going to keep this up?”

Hermione didn't look up from her book as her cheeks reddened some more. “What are you talking about?”

“You! This... this not doing *anything with anyone* anymore thing. I know exactly why you're doing it, Hermione, and I understand why you think you need to.”

Hermione chose not to reply but thought, *No, you really don't.*

Ally crossed her arms over her chest. “You think that if you stop having friends in this world that when you go back it won't be so hard to leave us behind.”

Hermione bit her lip and dipped her head.

Ally paused a moment before continuing. “I think that's a terrible plan. Not only do we have to deal with one of our great friends suddenly being cold and uninterested, but it means you'll be leaving on bad terms.”

Hermione shifted in her chair.

“You know how they say ‘never go to bed angry’? This is kind of like this.” Ally sat down on the chair next to Hermione and her tone changed from frustrated to pleading. “Hermione, if you leave with things the way they are now, you'll always wonder what you could have done differently. You'll always wonder why you didn't do this or say that and make things better. Believe me when I say it, because I have those thoughts often about... things.”

Hermione regarded her friend curiously. What had happened that Ally regretted?

The instant of sadness for whatever had happened passed quickly as Ally continued. "If you go back to the things were with us, and just *live* until it's time for you to go, then yes it will hurt to have to say goodbye. But at least we don't all go to bed angry."

The tiniest of smiles lifted one corner of Hermione's lips.

"Just think about it." Ally stood. "We'll be at the Three Broomsticks if you decide you want to join us after all."

---

As Ally and most of the other Gryffindors left for Hogsmeade, Hermione did think about it. After about an hour or two, she decided Ally was right.

Here she was, hurting others and bringing mountains of guilt upon herself because of it, all so she could "hurt less" when she returned to her world. When everything was back to normal, she would still have to deal with that guilt and like Ally had said, she *would* wonder what she could have done differently. Or better.

On the other hand, she could start over with her friends, move back to their warmth and their laughter, and later say goodbye properly. It would hurt to leave them behind, to be sure, but then she would have closure and good memories. Contrary to what she had thought before, she felt that this was in fact the "easier" way to go.

With a small smile, Hermione left for Hogsmeade.

---

Walking towards the Three Broomsticks, Hermione had mixed emotions. Mostly she felt apprehensive of how her friends would be after the way she had treated them. She pulled her coat tighter around her to ward off the falling snow and with a deep breath pulled open the heavy door to the pub. Warmth spilled out as she entered and much of her previous apprehension fell away. She saw her friends almost immediately and her smile faltered.

Ally waved, Draco beamed and the others were doing a combination of both. Hermione swallowed and headed over, the apprehension returning to twist her stomach in knots.

“Hi.” She said timidly.

Draco and Pansy scooted over nearer to the middle of the circular booth to create a space for Hermione. She sat and uncomfortably met everyone’s eye. None of them seemed to expectant of an apology or explanation, though Hermione felt honor-bound to present one anyway as more guilt washed over her.

“Guys... I’m really, really sorry for the way I’ve been acting lately.” She began and sighed. “I just... I’ve been messed up with this whole... Cedric and wish thing...”

Vinny patted Hermione on the back. “It’s ok, Hermione. We forgive you.”

She glanced at him. “I really am sorry.”

“Forgiven.” Draco piped up.

Hermione looked from face to face.

“We’re just happy you’re back, Hermione.” Pansy smiled warmly and Hermione felt a rush of gratitude and emotion.

*She looks nothing like a pug.* Hermione thought. *I was wrong.*

Moments later, it was almost as if nothing bad had ever happened between the six of them. After each complaining about homework and teachers (McGonagall most of all, of course) they moved on to school gossip and finally to funny stories. Draco was retelling one of his favorites from when they were all just first years and everyone was howling with laughter. Hermione downed her Butterbeer in between giggles.

In truth, she felt really good and was having a fun time. The only two problems at that moment were the increasingly unbearable heat in

the Three Broomsticks, and less noticeable, the ever present black cloud of her pending departure from this world.

The heat was easier to deal with, though she was finding she desperately needed some cool air or she would surely faint. With the outside cold and the heater in the very crowded pub turned way up to compensate, she was beginning to sweat. She could her friends were too, as nearly as red in the face as she, though they didn't seem nearly as bothered.

"Hey Ally, I'll be right back." She said quietly in her friend's ear.

"Sure. You okay?"

"Yeah. I just need some air."

"Yes, it *is* impossibly sweltering in here." Ally agreed and turned her attention back to Draco's story.

Once outside, Hermione exhaled in relief. The coolness of the frosty air outside was a wonderful contrast to the stuffy heat of the Three Broomsticks. As she looked around, she noted that since entering the pub, everything had gained another layer of sparkling snow. Little glistening flakes continued to fall from a gray sky and Hermione decide to walk a bit before returning to her friends.

She walked along admiring the way everything looked covered in snow and thinking primarily about her friends back in the pub, but also of memories of her, Harry and Ron walking across snow-covered grounds to go to see Hagrid. Before she knew it, she'd walked to the end of the street was heading in the direction of the Shrieking Shack. Moments later she was standing at the fence, very near the spot where she'd fought with Cedric and all her thoughts turned to him.

Hermione sighed heavily and dug her toe in the snow. Now that she was okay with her friends, she wished she knew a way to fix what she'd had with Cedric.

---

Cedric exited Honeydukes and hurried on the Three Broomsticks. He'd looked almost everywhere else in Hogsmeade and was really



beginning to think Hermione hadn't come at all was still back at Hogwarts. He knew he probably should have checked here first, but some part of him suspected that was most likely where she was and so he would leave it until last so that he might gather some courage along the way.

As he entered the pub, he spotted Ally at once and eagerly made his way over to her table. His hope evaporated when he reached her, however, and saw all of Hermione's friends but no Hermione.

"Er, hey." He said when they broke off their conversation to look curiously up at him.

"Hey Cedric, what's up?" Ally said and then added, "I haven't seen Ewan yet today, if you're looking for him."

"No, actually, I..."

"Have a seat then?" Ally offered and made a space for him.

"Thanks, but I was... I was actually looking for, um, Hermione."

Pansy's eyes widened and she traded significant glances with Ally before Ally replied a little casually, "I believe she stepped outside for some air."

"Thanks." Cedric answered and hurried out.

At first glance, he didn't see her anywhere and feared she'd gone back to Hogwarts. He began walking that way and didn't see her figure among the bundled up passersby heading from shop to shop, nor any of those heading back to the castle. A few moments later, however, he spotted a lone figure standing out at the fence near the Shrieking Shack. Even at a distance, she was unmistakable to Cedric.

With a deep breath, he walked towards her.

---

Hermione was leaning on one of the fence post rubbing her temples when Cedric approached. Though she heard his footsteps crunching

in the snow, she didn't think it was anyone coming to talk to her and therefore did not turn. At least, not until he spoke.

"Hermione."

She stiffened slightly as she twisted around to face him. "Hi." She said quietly, not sure what to think or say.

Cedric swallowed and looked uncomfortable. "Can I talk to you?"

Hermione thought of a few different responses to that question, first and foremost being, "I'd say you already are." She decided against saying anything at all, as she didn't really trust her voice at that moment and instead went with a small nod. She wondered what he wanted to talk to her about and firmly forced her mind not to race through a range of pleasant and unpleasant possibilities.

Cedric took a few steps forward and when he spoke, his voice was low and his words heart felt. "Hermione, I've been doing a lot of thinking and I see it now. I realize I was wrong and I'm sorry. I am so sorry for what I said to you, what I thought of you, how I treated you... everything." He paused and genuine emotion creased his forehead for an instant. "You were telling the truth all along and I... I was too stupid to see it and understand what you were telling me. I was too cynical to realize you weren't – aren't the same person you were a month ago... that I *thought* you were. I was too stubborn even consider or believe that what you were saying could be true. And I'm sorry. Really, very sorry."

Hermione bit her lip and dipped her head momentarily. "Ced, I... I've wanted to hear you say that since we fought. But..." Her sentence trailed off.

Cedric shifted another step closer to her and held his hands palm up towards her. "But what? Hermione, listen – "

"No, you listen!" She moved away from him and could feel hot tears burning at her eyes. She blinked hard and forced them away. "I *told* you. When I go back, you are *gone*. I can't – we can't..." she sighed in frustration. "I can't return to a world where you aren't even alive."

He smiled smally. "I know, Hermione. I know that when you go back to wherever you came from I don't really exist. But why should that stop us now? Why should we break off and never talk again, instead of living and being together?"

"It's not that easy." Hermione glanced away, her eyes doggedly trying to fill with tears. She fiercely blinked them back. *Don't you dare cry, Granger.* She snapped silently.

Cedric was standing quite close to her by this point. He placed his hand softly on her cheek and gently turned her head so his eyes met hers. "Of course it's not going to be easy." He said in a kind and quiet voice. "Either way it's not going to be easy. But don't you think it'll be easier to say goodbye in my arms rather than if we're not speaking?"

His comment was intended to coax forth a smile, and he got his wish. The corners of her mouth quirked into a tiny smile, though it disappeared almost as quick.

"The bottom line is that you will have to put up with me being quite nearby until it's time for you to go whether you like it or not. I thought I'd lost you once through my own stupidity and I'm not about to let it happen again."

Hermione's heart was pounding hard in her chest from his words, though definitely more from his proximity. As one lone tear managed to escape her best efforts to keep them in and slid down her cheek, Cedric brushed it away with his thumb. He could see the snowflakes sticking to her eyelashes and dusting her hair. It only made her seem more beautiful to him.

"Hermione Granger, I love you."

And before she could register what he'd said, before she could blink or even breathe, his lips were upon hers in a completely blissful, unexpected, wonderful kiss.

The world stopped turning, she stopped thinking, every trouble she ever had was gone, she was lighter than air, and there was no air. It was marvelous and indescribable, sweet and sizzling, warm and loving.

If she had been able to produce any kind of coherent thought besides the wild emotion blasting her sense, she would have thought of that old Marilyn Monroe movie where her skirt is blown upwards, the excited, gleeful emotion she portrays in that instant. Or in 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' after Audrey Hepburn believes she's lost her cat and the man she loves forever, only to find them both at once and share a passionate kiss with that man in the pouring rain.

Time started again when sometime later they pulled apart. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment – Hermione surprised and light as a feather, Cedric thrilled and relieved – before Cedric pulled her close again and hugged her tight.

To his shoulder she whispered, "I love you too."

## **Chapter 23**

The week following that glorious and snowy Hogsmeade day went by far too fast for Hermione's liking. She attended classes as usual, which were brighter and more enjoyable now that she had friends to giggle with and someone to partner with.

Charms of course turned into her favorite class as she and Cedric worked hard on the big project for Flitwick (well, mostly). She trained extra hard during Quidditch practice and it paid off when her team scored a narrow win over Hufflepuff in the next match. Though her team praised her and the others for their smart, enthusiastic play, Hermione felt a huge part of their victory came from the fact that Roger was still recovering from his accident.

By Friday, the snow that had been falling over the past week was five inches deep. After their last class of the day, Hermione and Cedric donned their winter gear and headed out into the white world. They walked hand in hand through the snow all the way to the large tree by the frozen lake before either of them spoke.

"It's so pretty." Hermione exhaled. "Everything is so white and sparkly and still."

Cedric grinned mischievously. "Perfect snowball weather too."

Hermione put her hands on her hips and said in a mock stern tone, "Cedric Diggory, don't you dare."

His smile widened as he took several steps backward before leaning over to grab a handful of snow and into a rounded shape about the size of a tennis ball.

"Cedric..." Hermione said warningly and fought to keep her own smile off her face.

"Yes, Hermione?" Cedric asked innocently as he raised his arm and took aim.

"Don't even thi- "

The snow splattered across her neck and shoulder before she could finish her sentence.

Cedric laughed behind his hand. "It slipped."

Keeping a very solemn look on her face, Hermione brushed the snow off her scarf, face and coat in a stiff and dignified manner. She eyed Cedric with the best "you-disgust-me" glare she could muster at that moment, before abruptly bending down to create her own snowball.

"You asked for it!" she yelled and whipped her snow at Cedric.

He laughed more as he danced out of the way.

They played like that for some time, until it finally ended with Hermione managing to catch Cedric off guard and half-fall, half-tackle him into the snow. They lay there panting and grinning with red faces, shining with the cold, and numb fingers for several moments before Cedric spoke.

"What's it like?" he asked.

"What's what like?" she answered.

"Your world. Where you were before you wished yourself here."

Hermione sighed a little. She had guessed that he would ask her sometime, but that didn't make it any easier for her to talk about it.

"Well... what do you want to know?" she finally said.

"What's different?" he turned on his side and propped his head up on his hand.

"Oh wow," Hermione chuckled. "A million different things." She paused. "For example, the Professor McGonagall I know is not even close to the one you know."

"How so?"

"She's strict, sure, and she likes her rules and regulations and for you to follow them. But she has a real good heart and she's sympathetic

in her own way. She's understanding and strong and she really *cares*." Hermione smiled sadly. "She is also very neat, very clean, and has little square glasses. She keeps her hair up in a tight bun at all times."

Cedric laughed softly. "She sounds cool."

"She's my favorite teacher."

"So... what else? What about the other Professors? Are they different too?"

Hermione couldn't help giggling just at the thought of trying to explain "her" Flitwick or Filch to Cedric. "How about I tell you on the way inside?"

"Good idea." Cedric stood first and then helped Hermione up out of the snow. "I think I've discovered that body heat melts snow which in turn makes one very *wet*."

Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes and continued talking about her world. She told him about the differences in all the Professors she could think of, then told him about how Cornelius Fudge was the Minister for Magic, and what the Ludo Bagman she knew was like.

By that time they'd reached the fourth floor and Cedric suggested they go to their respective dorms to change out of their wet clothes. Then they would meet in the one corner of the library that had couches, and in which Madame Pince actually allowed students to sit and talk – *quietly*.

Once warm and dry and seated in the library, Hermione resumed speaking about her world at Cedric's request. She started telling about how Draco Malfoy and the rest of her friends were, then about Voldemort and the Death Eaters. That led her to Harry's story, and on to her first year at Hogwarts with Harry and Ron. She'd just finished summing about her many stays with them at the Weasley's when she caught a funny half-smile on Cedric's face as he regarded her.

"You really like him, don't you?" he said in an undetectable tone.

“Who, Harry?”

Cedric shook his head. “No. Ron.”

Hermione felt her stomach unexpectedly clench. She cleared her throat a bit before answering lightly, “Well, sure, I mean, he’s my friend after all...”

“More than a friend?” he pressed.

Hermione faltered and looked away. She knew exactly what the answer to that question was, but there was no way she was going to tell it to Cedric – or anyone, for that matter. She loved Cedric now and first loves or old loves were not something you talked about with new loves.

Cedric gently brushed a lock of hair away from Hermione’s face and she turned to meet his penetrating gaze. In that moment, she realized what his beautiful silver eyes reminded her of: they were deep and perfectly silver with a hint of blue, just like a Pensieve.

“I can tell, you know.” He said. “As soon as you start talking about him, or particular moments between the two of you, your eyes get this crazy, extra sparkle. You smile just a tiny bit wider and you lift your shoulders just a little. And there’s something different in your voice, too. I didn’t notice at first, but the more you went on, the easier it was to see the difference between the way you talk about Harry and the way you talk about Ron.”

Hermione dropped her eyes. “Maybe it seems that way, but... I mean, we fight all the time. *All* the time. And he never does his homework and he’s not very serious about school, or anything, it seems, except maybe Quidditch. He has an awfully short temper and he’s so jealous of every little thing! And...”

“And yet you love him anyways.” Cedric finished calmly.

Hermione moved her eyes back up to his and tried to swallow the lump of emotion rising in her throat. His face was so open, warm and caring. He wasn’t asking because he was angry or jealous in any way. He was curious and completely understanding.



“But we’re just friends and always will be because he’s too thick to see anything so I have to give up on it. After all, like I said before, he’s awfully jealous and we *always* bicker and argue about every little thing and he... he... I...”

“Are you trying to convince me, or yourself, Hermione?” Cedric asked quietly.

Hermione bit her lip. Another question she knew the answer to but couldn’t say aloud.

“Does he love you back?” Cedric asked after a moment’s pause.

“I just said he was too thick to see anything between us.”

“Yes, but do you think *he* loves *you*?”

Hermione hesitated this time before replying. “I... I don’t know. Sometimes I think maybe he does, or maybe he likes me a bit more than a friend and then other times... Other times I think there’s no way he likes more than a friend or sometimes even as a friend... I don’t know if he loves me or not.”

Cedric nodded slowly and slid his arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “Well, he’d be insane and insanely *stupid* if he didn’t.”

After another minute or two of silence, it was Cedric who spoke again. “It’s ok, you know. This... being in love with Ron and still being here with me.”

Hermione glanced at Cedric confusedly to confirm whether he as serious or not. He certainly looked serious. But how could he be? If Ron were with someone else, it definitely wouldn’t be ok with her...

“You’re only here for a real short time and I plan to make the most of it. It’s been the wonderful time of my life.” He smiled kindly. “But I know I can’t have you forever. As much as I’d like to.”

Another small silence settled upon the pair though it was a comfortable one. They sat like that for quite some time, just sitting and thinking and watching different students come in and out of the

library. Eventually they started talking again, though it was on topics quite unrelated to love or Hermione's world.

## **Chapter 24**

Despite still missing “her” Ron, Hermione sometimes found it hard to even bring his kind freckled face to her mind when she was with Cedric, or think of the things Ron had ever said to her when Slytherin Ron yelled an insult at her from down the hall. It seemed that he and Slytherin Harry had made it their personal missions in life to make hurl insults at Hermione every chance they got.

On Sunday night as Hermione was working on her potion as usual, she found herself feeling oddly reluctant to keep adding ingredients and further it along. This made her feel quite guilty which in turn caused her to quickly think of something else. Her thoughts continued circling back to Cedric, her friends and everything else that had been brand new to her almost two months ago.

She thought of Sirius and how happy and *alive* he was. She thought about Remus and Hagrid. She thought about Bellatrix Lestrangle (a nun!) and Regulus Black (a kindergarten teacher!) – not Death Eaters, but wonderful people. Her thoughts turned to Snape, McGonagall and the rest of the Professors, how they were able to teach and not worry about things like escaped murderers or students seeing deadly visions that come true in the middle of the night. She thought about the Order of the Phoenix and it’s members, all of who were able to lead regular, peaceful lives, untouched by war or evil wizards. She thought of how wonderful it must be for Neville to have his parents taking care of him. She moved on to think about her friends: no longer terrible Slytherins, but honest, fun, *good* people.

If she stayed she would forever lose caring McGonagall, short Flitwick, and all her friendships in the real Gryffindor. She would lose Ron.

*If she stayed.*

The thought echoed through her mind like a giant gong had just been hit. She froze.

*If she stayed.*

She would never see Harry or Ron as they were again. Ginny, Lavender, Angelina, Seamus, Neville, and the rest would forever more be cruel, spiteful Slytherins. McGonagall would stay as a mean, unfair teacher.

*If she stayed.*

But Harry and Neville would both have their parents. Sirius would be alive and thriving. There would no Voldemort, and no Death Eaters. She would have Draco, Greg, Vinny and the rest. Ally would have Ewan. She would have Cedric.

*If she stayed.*

Deep in thought, Hermione completed another step of her potion before heading back to her dorm to think some more.

---

Just before supper, Ally entered the dorm blowing her nose. She looked paler than usual as she flopped down on her bed.

“How’s it going?” Hermione asked, setting her book down. She’d thought a lot about her situation and when thought she could think no more or her head would explode, she grabbed a book off her nightstand and got lost in it.

“Ugh.” Ally answered.

“That bad?”

Ally sat up. “My whole head feels completely clogged up.” She attempted to sniff and subsequently proved her point when she was unable to. “I hate being sick.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Me too. Don’t give me your cold germs, though, missy. I don’t want them.”

Ally smiled and lay back down.

“Bit out of the blue, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“Your cold. You seemed fine this morning.”

“I was fine this morning.” Ally groaned and buried her face deeper in her pillow.

Hermione laughed. “Are you coming down to supper then?”

Ally waved a hand in Hermione’s general direction.

“I’ll take that as a no. Alright then. Pansy and I will grab you something.”

“Sounds good.” Came Ally’s muffled response.

---

At supper, Hermione and her friends (minus Ally) had a wonderful time laughing and chatting. When the meal was over and they stayed talking, Cedric and Ewan came over and joined them.

“Alright.” Ewan rubbed his hands together. “Spill, you lot. Who’s dressing as what for Halloween?”

“Oh, I haven’t even thought about it.” Millicent shrugged.

Ewan looked scandalized. “What!? But it’s barely a week away! It’s on Friday and today is *Sunday*, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Well, *I’ve* thought about it.” Greg put in, and puffed up his chest importantly. “And I’m going as the Minister for Magic himself.”

There was a round of laughter as everyone imagined Greg dressed up and acting like Ludo Bagman. Hermione first thought of Cornelius Fudge when she joined the giggles, before she remembered that Ludo was actually the Minister as the others knew him.

“What about you?” Ewan jabbed his thumb in Draco’s direction.

“Ah. Pansy and I are going to go as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean.” Draco answered. “You know those two old-time Muggle movie stars?”

“But who’s going as which?” Cedric deadpanned.

They laughed some more before Draco replied loudly, “Well, *I’m* the one with the blonde hair!”

Hermione was clutching her sides and could hardly breathe when Ewan managed to turn towards her.

“And what about you, Hermione? I bet you’ve got something particularly clever up your sleeve.”

Just as Hermione had gained control of herself, her smile faded. According to her calendar, Halloween was the night her potion would be ready and therefore the night she’d be going back. The book said it had to be drunk immediately upon completion, so that ruled out waiting a day and then going back. She had not even given a thought to a costume or even participating in any of Hogwarts Halloween events because of her departure.

“I... I... “ she faltered, unsure of what to say, and desperately not wanting the have to answer, “*I won’t be here.*”

Cedric, who knew from Hermione telling him that Halloween would be her last night, answered for her. “She hasn’t decided yet either.” He smiled and gave Hermione’s hand a reassuring squeeze under the table.

“Well, get on that then!” Ewan said and proceeded to tell everyone about his fantastic costume, in which he would be going as Sirius Black, his favorite musician. He added that a girl from Ravenclaw named Hayley would be going as a screaming fan-girl.

Pansy, Cedric and Hermione shared a private grin, as they were the only three present who knew how well Hermione knew the real Sirius. She made a note to tell him later all about Ewan.

Almost more than an hour later, Hermione belatedly remembered her promise to grab Ally some food. She and Pansy departed the table and snuck down to the kitchens. Hermione was relieved to see the portrait of the fruit Bowl and even happier when she tickled the pear

and gained access to the kitchen. She'd been worried it had been changed. She thought of Harry and Ron as she entered.

Supper clean-up was apparently finished, as all the dishes were out of sight and there were only two little House Elves milling about the kitchen. Neither was Dobby or Winky, which disappointed Hermione. She'd been hoping to see them and see if they had changed. She bit her lip and tried not to think about S.P.E.W.

*Or, 'Spew', as Ron would call it.* She thought with a little smile.

Behind her, Pansy was gazing around the kitchen, mouth agape. "How in the world...?" she started and trailed off uncertainly.

Hermione giggled. "Don't ask how I know how to get in here."

Pansy shrugged a little and continued to look everywhere in surprise. "Later then." She said.

Hermione talked to one of the Elves, and moments after thanking the Elves for their kindness, she and Pansy were leaving the kitchens with some soup, juice, fruit and crackers for Ally. Almost the entire way back, Pansy talked about how wonderful the kitchen was, how wonderful the Elves were, how wonderful it was how Hermione got into the kitchens, how *exactly* did she get into the kitchens, and how perfectly wonderful it would be if Hermione disclosed her secret.

"It wouldn't be a secret then, would it?" Hermione answered teasingly.

"Oh, I suppose not." Pansy sighed exasperatedly.

---

"Hey." Hermione said quietly when she entered the darkened dorm carrying Ally's supper.

"Feeling any better?" Pansy asked, following Hermione in the door holding the rest.

Ally moaned and rolled onto her back, pulling the covers closer to her neck. "No." she finally replied.

Pansy and Hermione set the food on the nightstand and then sat down on either side of Ally.

"Sit up, Ally." Pansy instructed. "We brought you supper."

"Not hungry." Ally whined.

"Come on, you need to eat." Hermione encouraged. "It'll help."

Ally was too tired and achey to resist, so she let her friends help her sit up and prop her against some pillows.

Hermione felt her friend's forehead like her own mother used to do. "Oh Ally, you're burning up!"

"I'm freezing cold." Ally grumpily corrected as reluctantly munched on a cracker and held the blanket tight to her throat with the other hand.

"Fever?" said Pansy.

Hermione nodded. "I think so."

"Should we maybe take her to Madame Pomfrey?"

Ally made a protesting noise which Hermione silenced by putting her hand up.

"Well, maybe we'll just wait until morning and keep an eye on her during the night. If she's no better or if she's worse, we'll get Madame Pomfrey to look at her."

"Ok." Pansy agreed.

Ally groaned but was swiftly ignored as her friends tried to get her to have some soup. In the end, she finished off a few crackers, a sip or two of soup, and a little bit of juice but refused to anymore. Though not satisfied that their friend had eaten enough, they gave up nonetheless, and left her to rest while they headed down to the Common Room.



Pansy sighed as she settled down into one of the big armchairs by the fire. "Poor Ally. She looked fine this morning and now she's down with a fever."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I know. I really think if she's not better by tomorrow morning, we've got to get Madame Pomfrey to check her out. Just to be sure it's nothing more serious than the Flu or something."

The girls sat in comfortable silence for a little bit, both staring into the warm, flickering flames in the hearth. Eventually, it was Pansy who spoke.

"You know Hermione, I wish there was some way you could stay." She sighed. "I know *I'm* really going to miss you, and I'm sure the others will too."

Hermione's gaze stayed trained on the fireplace. "You won't have to miss me." She said.

Her friend glanced questioningly over at her.

Hermione swallowed, took a breath, and added firmly, "Because I'm not going to leave."

## **Chapter 25**

Pansy's jaw dropped. "What?"

"You heard me." Hermione said without meeting her friend's eyes. "I'm staying here."

"But your... your friends!"

"Are here. You guys are my friends."

There was a silence between the two girls as Pansy digested this rather sudden piece of news. She'd been hoping the entire time that Hermione would choose to stay, though she had *known* all along that Hermione would end up going back to her original world. That was where she belonged.

Now suddenly, Hermione had decided to stay. Pansy's face broke into a wide grin and she leapt from her chair and enveloped Hermione in a big hug. "I can't believe you're really staying!" she fairly squealed.

Hermione laughed then shushed her friend. "Not so loud. I want to surprise the others. So don't say a word to anyone!"

Pansy broke the hug and shook her head. "Alright, I won't. I'm dying to, but I won't."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"I'll tell them tomorrow after supper." Hermione smiled, feeling relieved, happy and very guilty all at once.

---

Throughout the rest of the following day, the smile stayed on Hermione's face. She enjoyed the day's classes and she and Pansy kept shooting glances at each other and sharing secret smiles. Though Draco continued to ask what was going on and soon became convinced it was a plan for a prank against him, Pansy insisted it

didn't have to do with him. Hermione reassured him that he and the others would find out after supper. This did nothing to quell Draco's "fears" however, and he took great pleasure in trying to guess what kind of a prank it was, and could he pretty please be in on it so they could do it to someone else.

Cedric, too, tried repeatedly to pry the secret from Hermione and even Pansy, though they refused to tell him no matter what. He would have to wait and find out with everyone else, Hermione promised.

By the last class of the day (and still some time away from supper), Hermione was absolutely bursting to tell someone and could not wait a minute longer for fear of suddenly shouting it out to the entire class. The instant class let out, Hermione found Cedric and led him hurriedly off to a less crowded corridor where her other friends would not bump into them.

"What is it? Where are we going?" Cedric asked.

"I just wanted to go someplace where the others wouldn't overheard us." Hermione said. "Because I have to tell you something really important and I can't stand staying quiet about it a second longer."

"Does this have anything to do with grin you've unsuccessfully been trying to hide all day?" he joked.

She laughed. "This has everything to do with that grin." She took a deep breath, followed by another. The students in the hall were already beginning to disperse, further emptying it out.

Cedric looked at her expectantly.

"Ced, I... I've decided to stay."

For an instant he looked stunned. Then he looked happy and confused, quickly followed by just confused. He tried to look happy over top of the confusion, but Hermione could see through it.

"Really?" he finally said.

Hermione squeezed his hands, a little uneasy by his reaction. “Yes, really.”

Cedric cleared his throat a bit. “Wow. I... I really don’t know what to say...”

“Well, say you’re happy, of course!” Hermione was becoming increasingly concerned and puzzled by the way he was acting. “Now we won’t have to say goodbye.” She paused. He didn’t look any happier by this statement. “You are... happy, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Cedric said in an odd hesitant tone.

“But...?” Hermione prompted nervously, concern escalating to worry.

“But... what about your friends?”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s exactly what Pansy said. They’re here, Cedric. My friends are *here*. You’re here. Here with Ally, Pansy, Draco, and the whole lot.”

“What about all the people you told me about? Your McGonagall, Lupin, Tonks, Mrs. Weasley... Hagrid...”

Hermione let go of Cedric’s hands and pulled away from him. “Why are you being like this? I thought of all people you’d be the *happiest* to hear of my decision to stay.”

Cedric stepped towards her. “Hermione, I *am*, believe me, I am. I just don’t think you’ve really thought this through properly.”

“I’ve thought about it quite *thoroughly*, thank you very much.” Hermione snapped, feeling defensive.

“Have you?” Cedric shot back, also sounding defensive. “Will you ever be able to look at the Slytherins here and totally forget all your old friends? Everything you’ve ever been through?”

“Well, no, of course not. No one could – “

“What about Harry?”

“What about him? He’ll have his parents back! It’s what he’s always wanted.”

“Hermione, try and recall just the other day when we talked about all the differences between here and there.” Cedric rationalized. “Here, Ally told you that Harry’s parents are completely horrible people. I realize in your world he lost his mom and dad and has always wanted them back, but this Harry doesn’t know that. He’s not that same Harry. This is what you keep telling me. So how is brand new, terrible human-being Harry having his terrible human-being parents a good thing?”

“I... he...” Hermione fumbled for a response, but Cedric continued before she need to give one.

“What about everyone else? You *know* all the differences between here and there. We talked about all of them the other day. I don’t understand how you feel you can truly leave all that stuff that you love behind.”

Hermione fought down the fast rising and unexpected lump of emotion clogging her throat. Why was he being like this? He was the main reason why she had decided to stay in the first place! And now here he seemed to be trying to convince her *not* to stay after all. She didn’t want to argue with him, but she had to make him see her side. She had to make him understand why she’d made the decision she’d made.

“Cedric,” she cleared her throat so she could gain control of her voice. “You’re forgetting that there’s no Voldemort or Death Eaters here. Sirius is alive, and so are you! I don’t want to have to go back to a world where I can’t live a normal life. Since my first year, my world is constantly being rocked by one thing or another that has do with Voldemort. I’m not ready to face that. I’m not ready to go back and see what will happen in my sixth year, who might be murdered, or what disaster will occur.”

Cedric sighed and totally sidestepped her words. “What about the Weasley family?”

“But Snape... a-and Filch...” Hermione trailed off.

“What about Ron?” Cedric said in a low voice.

Hermione’s throat tightened again and hundreds of memories blasted through her mind in less than an instant. She turned away from Cedric.

He sighed again, heavier this time. “I’m sorry, Hermione. I don’t mean to fight like this. I just... when you talked about everything the other day, I could see how much you missed everything. I want you to be happy, more than anything, in *any* world, and I don’t want you to stay here and leave behind everything just for me.”

She faced him again and said shakily, “I’m happy when I’m with you.”

He moved closer to her and placed his hand on her cheek. “Hermione, I’m happy when I’m with you too. But I believe someone else is as well.”

“Who?” said Hermione, though she was pretty sure she knew the answer that was coming.

“Ron.” Cedric said simply.

“Cedric, I told you he – “

“I know what you told me. I know every word of what you told me. But Hermione, I’m a guy too. And to be honest, I can read between the lines here. Maybe you don’t see it because you’re a girl or one of his best friends or whatever. Besides that, I feel like I just *know*. I really believe that he likes you more than a friend. In fact, I would go as far as to say I believe Ron Weasley loves you.”

“Cedric...”

“You said you came here by accident, meaning that you didn’t mean to come here and throw your old life away. You’ve said many times that you know you don’t really belong here.” He gazed intensely into her eyes. “It would be real selfish of me to keep you here, all to myself.”

Her lip trembled and the tears in her eyes threatened to overflow. He pulled her in a comforting hug and lightly kissed the top of her head.

When they finally pulled away, Hermione looked up with wet cheeks and was about to speak when she was startled to see how pale Cedric looked.

“Are you alright?” she asked with sharp concern. He looked really white.

His eyebrows scrunched together in confusion, wondering what had prompted the question.

“You looked awfully pale.” She added.

“Oh. Well, I’ve been feeling rather off lately, but nothing serious, I’m sure.” He answered.

“Just wondering because you look... abnormal.” She half-smiled a little wryly.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence that passed between them as they both thought about what had been said before Hermione had brought up Cedric’s health. When Hermione finally opened her mouth to speak again, she never got the chance, for at that moment, Professor Dumbledore rounded the corner and spoke instead.

“Oh! Miss Granger!” His aged face split into a grin. “What a pleasant surprise running into you and Mr. Diggory here. Pleasant, and convenient, I might add.”

As he approached them, Hermione and Cedric exchanged slightly confused, slightly apologetic looks.

“I happen to need a private word with Miss Granger and was just on my way down to the Great Hall in hopes to encounter you there at the coming dinner. Took the scenic route, of course, and as luck would have it, I found you along the way instead.” Dumbledore held his hands out palms up and gestured at the pair.

“I was actually just going to head down to supper myself, Professor.” Cedric said quickly, correctly sensing the moment to leave. To Hermione he added quietly, “We’ll talk more later, alright?”

Hermione nodded.

As Cedric retreated down the corridor and out of sight, Dumbledore turned twinkling eyes to Hermione. "I hope I wasn't interrupting anything important?"

Hermione's cheeks reddened ever so slightly. "Not at all." She replied. "What did you need to speak to me about, sir?"

Dumbledore's manner seemed to change gears instantly. Instead of happy and amused, and he suddenly looked quite somber and a little sad. "Some things that you are not going to want to hear and will like even less."

"Oh." Hermione shifted a bit uncomfortably at these words, unsure of what they could mean.

"I hate to have to drag you all the way to my office once more, Miss Granger, but it really would be the best, most private location in which to conduct our discussion." Dumbledore inclined his head a little. "Do you mind?"

"No, sir. We can go to your office." Hermione said.

The pair then proceeded on to Dumbledore's office. Only once they were both seated did Dumbledore finally begin to explain the reason behind this meeting.

"In the last owl I received from Sirius, he mentioned that he was a bit concerned about you." He said. "He told me that you'd been writing each other long letters detailing your days, and that the last letter he received from you was abrupt and extremely short. He first said he was sure it was nothing to get too worried about, and then asked if I knew of anything going on with you that might cause such a response. I replied that I could not properly discern anything to be wrong."

Hermione shifted uneasily in the chair she was sitting in, guiltily thinking of the letter Dumbledore was referring to. She'd truly hated sending it because it struck her as a cold little response after all they'd been telling each other, but at the time she could think of no better way to answer his letter. She'd been trying to cut herself off



from this world to make parting easier and now was realizing once again why that wasn't such a good idea after all.

Dumbledore tilted his head down a little so he was looking over his glasses at Hermione. "Which of course means, Hermione, that I could tell something was definitely amiss, though when I asked you if everything was alright, you failed to confirm my suspicions."

As Dumbledore returned to his previous posture, Hermione recalled that quick conversation she'd had not too long ago with Dumbledore outside the Great Hall, where he had asked if she was *sure* everything was alright – where she'd lied and said yes.

"Oh." She said, unsure of what to say.

"I think now, however, that things are much better?" Dumbledore asked lightly.

Hermione almost smiled. She could tell that by "things", Dumbledore meant her and Cedric's relationship. She appreciated his concern greatly and nodded. "Yes."

Dumbledore did not press about what exactly had been wrong. He merely continued on. "Good. The subject I need to discuss with you Miss Granger, is, as I previously stated, something you will not want to hear and will like even less. Nevertheless, it must be said, and I am truly sorry I did not tell you sooner. I am obviously beginning to forget things in my old age.

Hermione smirked. If Dumbledore ever "forgot" to tell someone something, there was almost always a very good reason for it.

He offered her a quick, warm smile, as if he could guess what she was thinking at that moment, before sighing. "In magic, as I'm sure you're aware, not all spells are completely permanent. Their effect fades after a certain period of time, which can at times have a positive effect, depending on the spell that was cast. Other times, when a spell fades, it can cause a negative effect to occur."

Hermione listened patiently, not clear on where exactly Dumbledore was going with this magic lesson, though sure it had a point nonetheless.

“For example, if you were to accidentally turn your hair blue, you’d be awfully glad if the effects wore off rather quickly. Whereas if the Sticking Charm on the back of your bathroom mirror were to up and fade away, that could have rather disastrous results to the poor mirror and potentially other areas of the bathroom.” He paused and added, “You see the problem, now, don’t you?”

Hermione hesitated. “No sir, actually... I don’t think I do. What does this have to do with me?”

“Miss Granger, do you recall the story I told you about the other time a situation of similar nature to yours occurred?”

“Yes sir, I do.”

“I may have omitted certain details.” Dumbledore said. “I was, and still am, more confident in your abilities at making difficult and complicated potions than I was in the girl’s, so I felt there was no reason to cause you worry by explaining the full extent of what came to pass at after approximately two months with this other girl. As the two month mark fast approaches now, however, I feel the need to divulge these details in case they help you, in any way.”

“What details, sir?” Hermione said with a slight shake in her voice. Dumbledore was already right. She did *not* like the way this was going...

“Well, as you know, the girl was eventually able to create the potion and reverse the effects of her catastrophic wish. I did not mention, however, that it was well past the two month mark when this occurred.” Dumbledore explained. “See, the girl had grown to love the new world she was in, and didn’t try as hard to continue with the potion. It began to slip and the girl decided it was better that she stay in her new reality. I was not aware of this until a few days after the two month mark, when she came and told me everything.

“What we did not know when the girl first made the wish, was that its effects are not permanent. After approximately two months, its effects began to fade. To put in the simplest of terms, as the spell deteriorated in nature, so did the effects it had created. That is to say, well, for lack of a better word... things *mixed*.”

“Mixed?” Hermione repeated with a uneasy dread collecting in her stomach.

“Yes, that probably is the best term for it. It was a glaring complication that was only unearthed much later. Apparently, thinking back, she had noticed several odd things leading up to the two month mark that could have warned her, though she didn’t realize it would lead to what they did.”

Hermione was listening intently, her insides churning in a guilty, worried way.

“Some things were small and some were a larger problem.” Dumbledore steepled his fingers as he talked. “One of the lesser issues that cropped up was a friend of hers had her two personalities merge into one. In the girl’s original world, the friend was a very shy, intellectual girl and in the new timeline, she was an excited, outgoing girl with no book smarts at all. As things melded together, the friend abruptly started becoming the shy, withdrawn girl, though she kept the trait of having a very careless attitude towards her schoolwork. As I said, that was one of the more mild consequences.”

Hermione exhaled slowly, her mind racing, thinking of any number of things that could happen if her two timelines became mixed together.

“So now, I believe, you see the problem.”

“Yes.” She breathed, her head beginning to pound with the information she’d just listened to. Hundreds of ideas, images and thoughts were darting wildly around her mind. Snape would be somewhere between his old sallow, Dark Arts self and the new Gryffindor-loving professor... Filch... Draco... McGonagall...

She stopped and inhaled sharply. “S-sir?” Her hands were shaking in her lap. “If things... ‘mix’, then what... what will happen to Sirius?”

And..." She suddenly couldn't bring herself to continue and say Cedric's name.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I don't know for sure, but I can't imagine it will be good."

Hermione swallowed, trying to fully absorb the information and not panic or break down crying.

"Hermione, I do not wish to further impress upon you the gravity of the situation. I believe you now fully understand how grave things could become if the potion is not finished on time and you use it to return things to normal." Dumbledore said sadly. "I do, however, want to add that it may seem hard to leave everything lovely here behind, but know it's all for the best. Try to think about what you're missing back in the old reality, and how those lovely things will not stay lovely if *you* choose to stay."

Hermione nodded numbly. "Yes sir." She said and stood to leave.

"Oh, and one last thing?"

She turned back to face the Professor.

"Hurry." He cracked a small smile. "I can only imagine what a Professor McGonagall who is excessively clean and smart will be like merged with one who is furious and filthy. I doubt it would be very pleasant."

Despite the seriousness of all that was told to her and all that lay before her in terms of her two timelines and the potion, Hermione had to smile. "I don't think so either, sir."

*Pleasant, no. She thought. But definitely entertaining.*

## Chapter 26

Hermione made her way down to the Great Hall for supper rather slowly, her mind whirling with everything Dumbledore had just explained to her. Besides her worry about how things could “mix”, Hermione had no idea what she was going to tell her friends.

Other than Pansy and Cedric, none of them knew of her earlier decision to stay and not drink the potion. All day she had been secretive and nearly giddy, promising to reveal the reasons behind her mood following supper. Now that she knew there was no way she could stay after all, what was she supposed to tell them instead?

As she entered the Hall and headed for her table, she still didn't have an answer. When her friends looked up at her coming with expectant grins on their faces, she felt worse but hurriedly rearranged her own features into a smile she hoped looked like one of the ones she'd been wearing all day.

*I have the whole meal to think of something.* She thought. *Oh Merlin, help me.*

“So, tell us, Hermione! What's the big secret you've been keeping all day?” Draco prompted the instant Hermione was seated.

Her heart sank. Before she could answer, however, Pansy piped up,

“No way, Draco. The deal was *after* supper. No questions, concerns, comedic remarks, complaints, or other comments until then.”

“Oh, that's hardly fair!” Vinny moaned.

“Alright, I'll let you have ‘comedic remarks’.” Pansy giggled.

Trying to give herself more time, Hermione said, “Ally's not here, you know. I should wait until we're all back in the Common Room so I can tell you all the same time...”

Her friends protested heartily and Pansy had to make Hermione promise to tell the others immediately following dessert in order to quiet them. Then she had the others promise not to say another word

on the subject until then. They all agreed, leaving Hermione desperately trying to come up with some sort of an explanation that would satisfy her friends.

On top of that, she somehow had to communicate whatever she came up with to Pansy so she wouldn't go ahead and tell everyone Hermione was staying before Hermione had a chance to tell them something else.

All through the meal Hermione was distracted with her predicament and didn't really join into the conversations that went around. Her friends, however, either didn't notice, were too preoccupied themselves, or didn't mind.

The end of dessert came far too quickly for Hermione's liking, as she *still* had no clue what she was going to say. She had thought several times about just telling them the truth, but she couldn't bring herself to dump the horribleness of it all on her friends if she didn't absolutely have to. If she didn't come up with something good very quickly, however, she was going to end up having to tell them about the mixing worlds.

"Alright Hermione, it's time!" Greg rubbed his hands together excitedly.

"Wait, don't you want Cedric to hear this too?" asked Draco.

Hermione almost blurted out that he already knew before she remembered he only knew about her earlier decision to stay. She jumped off the bench, snatching the opportunity for just a few more seconds to gather herself.

"Absolutely! I'll go get him." She hastily and rushed over to the Ravenclaw table where Cedric was just standing to leave.

When she reached him, she clutched his hand and whispered urgently, "I can explain everything properly later, but because of what Dumbledore talked to me about, I can't stay here after Halloween."

"What are you going to tell your friends?" said Cedric as they started to slowly make their way towards the Gryffindor table.

"Help me think of something." She answered and added pleadingly, "*Quick.*"

Hermione put on another forced smile as she settled back down on the bench this time with Cedric beside her. She held his hand nervously under the table and he gave her an encouraging squeeze. All her friends looked to her, eagerly awaiting what she had to say.

"Well." Hermione cleared her throat uneasily. "As you all know, there's something you... that I have to tell you. And actually, after all the... um, the grinning on my part and guessing on your part, I think that... that what ever I have to tell is going to be... well, *will* be, a... uh, a let down. It's *really* not as funny, cool, secretive or wonderful as you might be thinking. Basically, what I mean to say is... that you may haven gotten excited over nothing."

"Oh, get *on* with it already." Vinny said.

"Yes, ok, well, see, the thing is..." Hermione began and nothing came to her mind. "The, uh, the thing is... um, well, it's... I..."

Some of her friends looked a little confused, a little disappointed or even a little concerned.

Hermione sighed. *I guess I have to go with the truth after all.*

"Ok, the truth is..."

"Hermione has come up with a very clever Halloween costume idea." Cedric interjected swiftly.

Draco, Vinny, Greg, and Millicent shifted their gaze to Cedric.

"Oh, that's not it." Pansy laughed.

"Of course it is!" Hermione said and looked at Pansy imploringly, silently praying she would play along.

Pansy glanced at Cedric puzzledly.

“Yes, that is what she’s been smiling about all day.” Cedric said. “You ready to hear the details now?”

“Oh the *build-up*, all for a mere *costume*!” Greg threw his hands up in mock aggravation.

“That’s our Hermione.” Draco winked.

“She’s going to go as the Muggle fairytale character, Cinderella.” Cedric stated. “Seeing as how she’s going to have to be leaving close to midnight because of her, er, ‘situation’, she thought it would be quite clever to go as Cinderella.”

Hermione held the smile on her face which quickly turned into a genuine one at Cedric’s words. She squeezed Cedric’s tight to say “Thank you” as she exhaled in relief. She wasn’t going to have to reveal to them the mixed worlds after all.

“That actually is quite brilliant.” Draco admitted. “So *that’s* the big secret, then?”

Hermione nodded.

“So why in the heck were *you* grinning all day too, Pansy?” He turned to face Pansy and Hermione was struck with a stab of panic.

*Please Pansy, she begged. Please go with this.*

“I... “ Pansy hesitated. “I... am... making her costume!”

“Oh, I see. Well, it’d better be awfully good after what you two put me through today.” Draco crossed his arms over his chest. “I was terrified I was going to get pranked.”

Pansy laughed. “You were worried for nothing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say ‘for nothing’.” Vinny waved a finger. “He’s been on the receiving end of many of Hermione’s pranks before. Considering how days leading up to those pranks usually went, I’d say he had a very legitimate reason to be scared.”



They all laughed and Hermione was little bit upset to hear she was apparently known for some wild pranks. Though she figured Fred and George Weasley would be proud of her, that wasn't a comfort. She pushed the thought from her mind – after all, it hadn't *really* been *her* doing the pranks.

“So how come you let Cedric in on this before us?” asked Greg.

“Because,” Hermione replied. “He’s going to be Prince Charming.” She smiled at Cedric as if to say, “That ok?”

He smiled right back.

“That’s right. I’m going as the Prince.”

After that, the group hung around and talked before deciding a little while later to head back up to the Common Room for the rest of the evening. Draco, Vinny, Greg and Millicent rose to leave.

“You coming?” Draco asked.

“We’ll be right there. I just have some costume issues to talk about with these two.” Hermione answered.

“See you soon, then.”

As soon as the others were out of earshot, Pansy practically demanded,

“Ok, now tell me what’s going on. I thought you were going to tell them about you staying.”

“I’m not staying after all.” Hermione sighed.

Pansy froze. “What?”

Hermione then proceeded to explain to Pansy and Cedric all that Dumbledore had told her about the two worlds merging and causing all kinds of terrible problems and issues. She finished by saying,

“I didn’t want them to know all that. They don’t need to know what isn’t going to happen.”

"I understand." Pansy said quietly.

"I'm so sorry, Pansy." Hermione put her hand on her friend's shoulder. "I didn't mean to get your hopes up."

"It's ok." Pansy smiled smally. "I really do understand. There's no way you can stay now."

"Thanks you. And thank you too, Cedric, for coming up with something to say." Hermione said. "It really is rather clever."

"No problem." He replied. "Besides, I quite like the idea of going with you as the Prince."

"We should probably be heading to Gryffindor now." said Pansy.

The trio stood and started across the Great Hall.

"We ought to stop in and visit Ally on the way." Hermione suggested. "See if she's doing any better."

"What happened?" asked Cedric.

Hermione and Pansy explained how Ally had become sick the other day and had been getting progressively worse. That morning they had taken her to the Hospital Wing to see Madame Pomfrey, who promised to look after her and help her get better.

They were almost to the Hospital Wing when Snape rounded a corner ahead of them and said, "Ah, there you two are. You weren't in the Tower."

Hermione and Pansy glanced at each other, wondering why Snape was looking for them. Were they in trouble?

"What is it?" Pansy questioned when Snape had closed the distance between himself, the two girls and Cedric.

"I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, girls." Snape sighed heavily. "But your Ally has been taken to St. Mungo's."

Hermione and Pansy both paled.

“What?” Hermione breathed, feeling as though the bottom of her stomach had dropped out.

“Madame Pomfrey has been keeping a close eye on her all day, trying different remedies to help her get well again.” Snape explained. “She was having trouble figuring out exactly what was wrong, and none of the things she was trying seemed to be helping. Ally took a turn for the worse just before supper time. Flitwick, Madame Pomfrey and I took her to the emergency room at St. Mungo’s. We’ve only just got back.”

“Is she ok? Is she going to be ok?” Pansy was shaking as badly as her voice. “What’s wrong with her? Why didn’t Madame Pomfrey know what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to find you and let you know what’s going on, because I know you’re good friends with her.” said Snape sympathetically. “I didn’t explain anything to your other friends upstairs. I figured you would want to do that.”

“We were just on our way to see her in the Hospital Wing.” Hermione said hollowly.

“Can we visit her now? In St. Mungo’s?” asked Pansy.

Snape shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. It’s quite complicated to get clearance for Hogwarts students to leave the school, even with a teacher, unless it has to do with direct family. The earliest Dumbledore would be able to make it happen is the weekend.”

Hermione fleetingly thought of the time Mr. Weasley had been badly injured last year while she, Harry and Ron were Hogwarts.

“I know this is tough to hear. Maybe you should head up to your dorms and try and get some rest.”

Hermione nodded numbly and Pansy looked away.

With a last sad smile, Snape left them and the trio continued on to Gryffindor Tower. Pansy was on the verge of tears much of the time and kept asking questions none of them had the answers to, such as

why was Ally so sick? What had made her so sick? Why did they have to wait until the weekend to see her? Hermione felt very worried about her friend and almost nauseous. Cedric said nothing and walked beside them the entire way to Gryffindor.

When they arrived, Pansy went straight into the Common Room to inform Draco and the others about Ally, while Hermione waited behind a moment to say good night to Cedric. She sighed deeply, turned to face him and was unpleasantly taken aback by his appearance.

“Cedric! Are you alright?”

He looked even more sickly than he had earlier and sweat had popped up across his forehead. He seemed very tired and he had his hand on the side of his head while pain creased his features.

“Cedric?” she said again, a little more urgently.

“I’m ok.” He answered after a moment and took his hand away from head. “Just suddenly dizzy. Bad headache, too.”

“You look awful. Should I be walking *you* to *your* dorm?”

“No, it’s alright. I’m fine. Probably just over tired.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you dare go and get sick with the same thing Ally has.” Hermione said warningly, her voice etched with worry. “Cinderella can’t go to the ball alone, you know.”

Cedric smiled and it indeed appeared that the worst of his headache had just passed. “She won’t. I promise the Prince *will* be there.”

“He’d better be.” Hermione hugged Cedric tightly. “Good night. Get some sleep, Prince.”

“You too, Cindy.” Cedric kissed Hermione’s cheek and they parted.

Hermione felt rather uneasy about Cedric’s abrupt headache and dizziness, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it. She just

hoped he would be better by morning. He was probably right, though, she decided. He was probably just over tired.

## **Chapter 27**

The next couple of days passed rather similarly: Hermione went to class, worked on the Potion, worried about Ally, kept an eye on Cedric, did her homework, attended Quidditch practice, and prepared for the upcoming costume Halloween feast.

The Potion had less than ten steps to completion and had turned to a lovely almost see through, sky blue color. It had the subtle smell of a fresh water creek in springtime and when bubbles popped from it's surface, there was a tiny extra burst of fragrance in the air. Hermione started to get butterflies in her stomach whenever she worked on the Potion. Soon, she'd be able to change everything back to the way it was. A large part of her still wanted to stay, though she knew she no longer had a choice. She had to go back or she risked wrecking everything wonderful that existed in this world.

Snape or Madame Pomfrey updated Hermione and her friends on Ally's condition if there were any changes or news. For now, she hadn't gotten any worse, though she apparently was definitely not well enough to leave St. Mango's. The Healers at the hospital were so far stumped as to what was causing Ally to become so ill or how to get her well again, though they were determined to make her healthy again.

Cedric also did not seem to worsen, though he too didn't show any signs of getting better either. He continued to appear very pale and he kept having frequent headaches and dizzy spells. Madame Pomfrey decided that Cedric must have caught a little of the flu or something and she gave him some medicine to combat the headaches. The medicine did help, but not significantly, which frustrated the school nurse who prided herself on fixing any health related issue quickly and correctly.

In the evenings, once their homework was done, and Hermione and the rest of the Quidditch team had finished practicing, Pansy and Hermione spent much of their spare time designing and creating their costumes for the feast on Friday night. Pansy was having a hard time choosing which outfit she would wear. She wanted to wear a long evening gown that Marilyn Monroe had worn when she performed a

musical number in one of her more well-known movies. However, the white dress she wore in a different movie, was by far the most famous of Marilyn's wardrobe.

One night when the Gryffindors were winding down after a long day and Hermione and Pansy were working on costume ideas, Pansy held up two photos of Marilyn Monroe which showed the two costume ideas she was trying to decide between. In the one on the right, Marilyn was giggling as she stood over an air vent and air blew her white skirt skywards. She held it down (more or less) and grinned flirtatiously. In the other, Marilyn was dancing across a stage in a long, bubble gum pink evening gown, complete with long pink gloves and sparkling diamond bracelets.

"Which one do you like better?" Pansy asked Vinny first, who was scrambling to finish a three foot long essay for History of Magic, due the next morning.

He glanced up quickly, startled that he was being asked for an opinion. "Um..." He glanced from one picture to the other and back again, completely clueless. He shrugged.

Pansy laughed at the expression on his face and turned the photos towards Greg instead. "Alright fine then. Greg?"

Greg stopped reading his book for a moment to regard the two pictures. He too shrugged. "Go with the white one." He said a second later.

"Millicent?" Pansy faced the photos in Millicent's direction.

Millicent cocked her head and after a moment of chewing her lip, she straightened and replied, "Definitely the pink one."

"Ok... Draco? What about you?"

Draco eyed the pictures and Pansy thoughtfully for several seconds before answering, "Well, clearly the pink one would better compliment your skin tone with your dark hair and dark eyes." He paused slightly and then added, "But the white one's hotter." He winked and everyone laughed.

“Skin tone more’? You’ve been reading my *Teen Witch Weekly*, haven’t you?” Pansy said then held the photos up for Hermione to see. “Hermione? What do you think?”

“Hmm... I think I agree with Draco.” Even now, after so many weeks, it still felt so strange for such a sentence to be coming from her mouth. She brushed off the feeling and continued, “The pink one *would* look better with your complexion, I think. But he’s right – the white one’s hotter.”

Another round of laughter followed this joking statement before Pansy set the pictures down on the table in front of her.

“Which one do *you* like better, Pansy?” Hermione asked.

“Well, the white one is much more famous, I know... but she’s wearing such beautiful jewelry with the other one.” Pansy sighed. “I still can’t decide!”

“You’re the one who has to wear it all night,” Draco reminded her. “So pick the one you’ll feel more comfortable in.”

Pansy sighed again. “In that case, it’s got to be the pink one.”

“What!” Draco sat bolt up right in his chair looking mock-stricken. “Why!?”

“That white one is *awfully* low cut.” Pansy explained. “I don’t think I’d feel that comfortable wearing that at the feast.”

“*I* would feel *very* comfortable if you wore that to the feast.” Draco said with a straight face.

Hermione giggled as the others laughed and Pansy threw a pillow playfully at Draco’s head.

“Ok! Everyone! How about we either be *quiet*, leave the room, and *stop* talking about *costumes*!” Vinny burst out. “Some of us only have a few hours left to finish a stupid essay!”

“Well maybe if you’d done it earlier like the rest of us...” Greg began.



"I said, 'be quiet!'" Vinny snapped and tried to return to scratching out his essay.

Hermione laughed. "Alright, alright, we'll keep it down."

"That's more like it." Vinny grumbled.

Draco rolled his eyes and made a funny face at Vinny. Pansy giggled behind her hand.

For the rest of the evening, the friends did their own thing: reading, doing other homework, working on their costumes, and other quiet activities. When it was nearly midnight and most of the others had headed off to bed, Hermione felt bad for Vinny and helped him complete his essay in less than half an hour.

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The following morning, Hermione received an owl from Sirius at breakfast. Before she'd even opened the letter, she felt mixed emotions. She was happy to hear from him but sad because she knew this would likely be the last owl or letter she would ever get from him.

As she pulled out her letter, she belatedly realized that the envelope was heavy and packed with several other pieces of paper. She quirked an eyebrow and assumed the explanation would come in Sirius' letter.

*" Dear Hermione,*

*I haven't forgotten about you, don't worry. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get a reply back to you. I've been going through a nasty flu and haven't been able to gather enough energy to sit down and write the reply I wanted to you. Finally, today, I'm feeling well enough to attempt a reply.*

*I got your last letter more than a week ago and it was a little... off, from your usual. I ended up talking to Dumbledore shortly after that and it sort of came up in the conversation. Just the other day he explained everything. I now know the complexity of your situation (the whole thing with the worlds mashing up if you stay).*

*Hermione, I am so sorry. I'm sorry you have to go through this, and worst of all, you have so many reasons pulling at you to stay. Besides all the new friends you've made, there was Amos Diggory's boy that you said you were real close friends with, and that's going to be real tough to have to leave behind. I'm so sorry you have to do this...* “

Hermione's throat was clogging with emotion and her eyes were starting to blur with tears. Not particularly wanting to cry at the breakfast table with so many people around, she wisely decided to save the rest of the letter for later. She folded it up, slid it back into the stuffed envelope, and put it in her bag.

Luckily no one seemed to have noticed her extra moist or slightly red eyes, and Hermione was able to put the letter out of her mind for the time being. As she was exiting the Hall, however, there was something new to occupy her mind. Cedric, as she had just noticed, was no where in site.

Ewan was leaving the Hall at that moment too, so Hermione called out to him and then hastened over.

“Ewan, is Cedric alright?” she asked breathlessly when she'd reached him, concern welling up inside her fast. “He's not here, I didn't see him, and I thought he was going better, and he said he only had bad headaches and Madame Pomfrey was giving him medicine for that and – “

“Calm down, Hermione.” Ewan put his hands up as if to stem the flow of Hermione's worried words. “He decided to sleep in this morning. Since the feast is tomorrow night, he wants to make sure he's properly rested enough to go. He was feeling particularly off color this morning so he took some of that purple stuff Pomfrey gave him and is skipping this morning's classes.” Ewan chuckled and lowered his hands. “He's going to see if he can get something from Pomfrey for tomorrow night so he'll have some energy and strength to be your Prince.”

Hermione exhaled as relief swept away a good portion of her previous worry. “But he's alright? He's hasn't gotten worse?”

Ewan shook his head. “I don't think so.”

Hermione exhaled again. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so panicked."

Ewan shrugged. "I would be too. No worries."

Hermione suddenly noticed how tired and sad Ewan looked. She hadn't really seen him over the past several days and when she did, it was usually from much farther away. Standing beside him and seeing him up close, however, revealed the dark circles under his eyes. He looked as though he hadn't slept in a week and like he was very upset about something and was trying to hide it. She didn't know Ewan all that well, but he was Cedric's best friend and apparently very close to Ally as well, and even Hermione could see Ewan was missing his usual spark of mischief in his eyes.

"Don't tell me you're sick too?" She said, eyeing him apprehensively.

Ewan sighed a deep, heavy sigh. "No. I'm just really worried about Ally."

"Oh Ewan... "

"Because I'm not family, they're making me wait until the weekend before I can get in to see her."

"That's us too." Said Hermione quietly.

"I just..." He rubbed his eyes. "I can't sleep thinking she's lying in a hospital bed, real sick, and I'm not there with her."

Hermione dropped her eyes to her shoes. She wanted to say or do something to make him feel better, but what could she do? She was thinking about walking away as the silence between them began to stretch, when she bit her lip and impulsively threw her arms around Ewan's neck in an awkward, empathetic hug.

"She'll be alright." She said into Ewan's shoulder. "I know it." She pulled away a few seconds later.

"I hope so too." Ewan said, his eyes shining brightly with moisture.

Hermione smiled and started to walk away. She had only gone about four feet when Ewan croaked,

“Hermione?”

“Yes?” She turned to face him.

“Thanks.”

---

It was late evening after most everyone else had gone to sleep when Hermione sat in the corner of the Common Room and retrieved her bulging envelope from Sirius. She was still quite curious about the rest of the contents besides her letter, but she silently promised she would refrain from peeking until she'd finished reading her own letter first.

She began reading at about the spot where she left off at breakfast.

*“ ...close friends with, and that's going to be real tough to have to leave behind. I'm so sorry you have to do this.*

*I was trying to think of some comforting or wise-sounding words for you, other than the usual, 'It's for the best' and 'It's meant to be'. Unfortunately, I couldn't – I bet Remus could, though. He was always good at that sort of thing.*

*Seriously though Hermione, as cliché as those sayings may be, I think they do apply in this situation. It's going to be awfully hard to have to leave your new friends behind, like I said before, no question. But just think, Hermione, about what you're getting back! I know all about the school-saving adventures you, Harry and Ron managed to get yourselves tangled in over the past several years. All you have to do is think about how much you three (The Magic Trio!) have been through, and I think you'll find more than one reason to get things back to normal. I think I could name a dozen things off the top of my head right now if you asked me to.*

*Another thing – yes, there is apparently no Voldemort here, and so it appears as though there is no evil to taint this world. I can't believe that is exactly true. If there is good, I think there will inevitably be evil,*

*whether it's lurking in the shadows biding it's time or pouring out a full frontal attack. Who's to say there isn't something or somebody out there right now who's worse than Voldemort, and is biding his or her time?*

*All this ties in with that 'It's all for the best' line. Now for the harder one to swallow: the 'It's meant to be' line.*

*As you can imagine, this one was and is a hard one for me to come to terms with. I'm all about changing my future, that nothing is written in stone, that nothing is truly 'meant to be'. When you go back to our world, I'll be long gone – another casualty of this 'new war' that you, Harry and so many others are being forced to fight. It's true, that if you stayed here, I'd probably get to keep on being this adored rock star. As nice as that sounds, I can't let that happen and neither can you. You've got to go back where I'm dead, Hermione, and don't you dare feel guilty about that.*

*This is going to be really hard to explain, but I'll try to anyways. I feel like I... that I am like the first domino in a whole series of dominos. That my death is just the beginning of a whole big 'master plan' that's going to bring down Voldemort for the second time – for good. I'm not sure that makes sense, and I don't really know why I feel this way, just that I do very strongly. I really believe that my death is, well, 'meant to be'. It's incredibly hard to understand, I know, because I barely understand it myself.*

*Let me put it this way: I believe Harry will win this. I have a powerful faith in you, Harry, Ron, Dumbledore, the Order and everyone else, that together you will come out on top. I think surely that's something to go back for: hope. Hope that this'll all be over soon.*

*Okay, I think I've rambled long enough and confused you thoroughly by now, and besides that, I'm really starting to lose what little energy I had to begin with before starting this letter. I'll sum this up and explain one last thing.*

*By now I'm sure you've noticed that the envelope I sent you is rather thick. Inside are a number of letters I wrote to different people in our world. Sort of a set of 'things I never got to say'. I don't know if they'll*

*transfer back with you, but I'm hoping you'll figure out a way to make it work. If not, then there's no harm in trying.*

*As for my 'things I never got to say' to you, Hermione, here it is:*

*You are possibly the smartest, cleverest witch I have ever known and don't let anyone ever tell you differently. You have such a good heart and an endearing warmth about you. You are always looking out for everyone's best interests, even if they're not. I still sometimes think of the night we met in the Shrieking Shack and the way you calmly asked the perfect questions to the unexplained bits in Remus and my story. Way to keep calm and collected no matter what. Keep your chin up always, Hermione, and keep being strong.*

*I'm sure I'll see you again someday, one way or another.*

*Sirius “*

Hermione was extremely glad she has chosen to read the letter now rather than earlier, and she was thankful no one was left in the Common Room by the time she'd reached the middle of the letter, as she was crying heavily. Tears streamed down her cheeks even though she kept wiping them away with her sleeves. She wanted very badly to see Sirius and say goodbye in person. She desperately wanted to see Harry again, and not Slytherin Harry, but brave and loyal Harry. Most of all, she wanted to see Ron; red haired, freckle-faced, infuriating and wonderful Ron.

When she regained her composure, Hermione thought of the other letters in Sirius's envelope. She wouldn't read them of course, but they had given her an idea. She wanted to write her own version of the 'things I never got to say' letters to her friends here, even if they ended up being short. She guessed she would be up fairly late doing them, but she didn't mind. It suddenly felt extremely important to say the things she wouldn't have the chance to say before she left.

Wiping her puffy and wet eyes dry, Hermione gathered her ink, quill and some parchment from her bag, then set to work writing her own goodbye letters.

## **Chapter 28**

The following day was the much anticipated day of the special Halloween feast and excitement filled the castle. The students couldn't wait for classes to be over so they could rush back to their dorms and get into their costumes. Fortunately, Professor Dumbledore graciously announced at breakfast that classes would be ending an hour early in honor of the festivities to take place later that evening. Professor McGonagall was livid by this statement but could do little more than sit at the staff table and turn several shades of red. Luckily, the Gryffindors didn't have Transfiguration on Fridays, so they were able to avoid McGonagall's wrath altogether.

When the post came that morning, Draco and Hermione received their daily newspapers. Same as always, Draco skimmed the front page and was about to stuff it away for later when Pansy asked if she could read it.

"Honestly Draco, after *how* many weeks of this term and you *still* can never remember she wants to read your copy?" said Greg.

"I have better things to remember." Draco said haughtily.

Pansy pretended to be offended as Greg rolled his eyes and spooned himself some more eggs. Vinny laughed, as he thought Draco was only joking. Hermione, however had just happened to glance up at Draco at that moment, and was startled to see the ghost of the old Draco Malfoy flash prominently across his features. It was there for a moment then disappeared just as fast. She shook her head. She was just seeing things.

Hermione turned her attention to spreading her own copy of *The Prophet* out on the table beside her cereal and began to read, forgetting about Draco. She nearly choked on her food when she was about halfway through the front page article which Draco had not found interesting enough to read right away.

The headline read, "*St. Mango's Flooded with Patients*"

Underneath was a picture of a harried-looking Healer with short brown hair and clear blue eyes, with the caption: "*Head Healer*

*Octavius Cuthbertson speaks candidly about the recent epidemic at Mango's."*

Hermione quickly started to read the article next to the picture.

*"Over the past week, a record number of people have been falling ill and heading to St. Mango's Hospital to recover. Healers have been forced to work extreme overtime hours to deal with the influx of new arrivals. People have been crowding the emergency room and filling the empty beds at all hours of the night, with no end in sight.*

*'We tend to get a rush of people during holidays and weekends, due to pranks, accidents and people being bored,' said Head Healer Octavius Cuthbertson in yesterday's press conference about the sicknesses. 'However, it's not any special holidays right now. We were expecting to fill up more than usual after Halloween, as we do every year, due to pranks gone wrong and the like. Not before, however, and not this full.'*

*According to Cuthbertson and other Healers at the hospital, the majority of the ill have all been experiencing symptoms similar to the flu. High fever, migraine headaches, stomach aches, vomiting, energy loss and weakness, to name a few. However, Cuthbertson is sure it's not the flu.*

*'For one, patients with flu-like symptoms are not responding to treatment. Secondly and more importantly, many of the patients have been having other symptoms too, that lead us to believe it's not in fact the flu that is causing people to be ill.' He says. 'Some people suffer from extreme dizziness or dizzy spells, become very disoriented suddenly, have trouble speaking or remembering things, become shaky, or experience acute cold-like symptoms such as plugged sinuses, sore throat, coughing and so on. In a few extreme cases, the patient has progressed to the point where they are in a coma-like state.'*

*The Healers at Mango's are doing their best to find a quick solution to the sudden incursion of illnesses, and have so far not had much luck. Usual remedies don't seem to be helping and more patients seem to be coming in every day, with very few leaving. When asked if the*



*massive flood of maladies were the start of a epidemic, Cuthbertson snorted and shook his head firmly.*

*'No, it's not the start of an epidemic, nor a pandemic, by any means. Every few years something new comes along that sends everyone into a blind panic. We have always managed to find a solution and no disease has ever gotten out of hand. This one is no different. It's just a matter of time. I assure you, and the public, that this will pass, and everyone will turn out just fine. In the meantime, we're working as hard as we possibly can to heal these people.'*

*When some members of the community voiced concerns about St. Mango's having enough staff or beds to accommodate the sick, Cuthbertson replied, 'We are training new Healers and creating room. No one will be turned away because of staff shortage or no empty beds.'*

*According to Cuthbertson and other Healers at St. Mango's, approximately forty-six people have officially checked into the hospital citing this mystery illness as their ailment since last Friday, though they refuse to comment on how many are sick in total. Of those forty-six, twelve are underage wizards and eight are senior citizens. Among the adults are Barty Crouch Sr., whose son work at the Ministry of Magic, as well as Bertha Jorkins, another Ministry worker, distinguished author Wilma Buttonshot, and influential wizarding couple Lily and James Potter, whose son attends Hogwarts with some of the ill underage wizards and witches (though has so far shown no sign of also contracting the sickness). Lastly, and probably most notably, the star of the smash-hit band The Weird Sisters, Sirius Black, has also apparently fallen ill, though sources say he refuses to check into Mango's for fear of being mobbed by fans.*

*For more on The Weird Sisters tour and other entertainment news, go to page 7.*

*Full signs and symptoms that could mean you have the Mystery Illness, turn to page 4."*

*Hermione felt as though she had suddenly plunged deep into very icy water. It made sense now. It all made perfect, horrible sense. Everyone who was falling ill was dead in her timeline. Judging by the*

article in *The Prophet*, it seemed the symptoms were worsening as time went on. Hermione was filled with dread at the thought of many others getting sick if her potion didn't work and she was forced to stay behind longer.

She immediately thought of Cedric and his headaches and severe dizzy spells. She felt dizzy herself.

*It's me.* She thought numbly. *It's me and my stupid wish. That's he's getting sick so fast. It's because he's not supposed to be alive.*

"Hey, Hermione, what is it?" asked Draco, seeing her pale, frightened face across from him.

"It's..." She wasn't sure she could say it out loud. "Look."

Her friends leaned close as Hermione read the article for them to hear, her voice shaking nearly as much as her hands.

"So *that's* what happened to Ally." Said Vinny. "She caught this flu thing. Gee, that's too bad." He turned back to his food, as did Greg and Draco. Pansy looked thoughtful and worried, then moved her eyes to her own newspaper.

She couldn't believe her friends were so calm and unaffected by this piece of news. What was *wrong* with them? Didn't they *understand* what was going on? How could they be so insensitive? Didn't they care at all? After all, Ally was their friend too!

She took a breath and was about to let loose on her friends when she realized: no, they *didn't* really understand. She took another breath, this one deeper than the last.

"It's worse than you think." She said and lowered her voice. Her friends glanced up from what they were doing at her tone and all leaned in to hear the rest of what Hermione was saying. "I did this."

"What? Hermione, you couldn't have made people sick – " Pansy started.

"No, listen to me. These people. They're... in my timeline, they're dead." The others stared at her with mixed looks of horror and confusion. She continued, "Lily and James, Bertha Jorkins, Sirius Black. All of them. They're gone."

"But what about Ally?" said Vinny quietly. "Is she...? You know..."

"I don't know who she is. In my other world, I've never seen her before in my life, and I've never heard of her family." A shocked silence followed these words. Hermione swallowed and added, "Worst of all, I think Cedric is going to be next if I don't leave *tonight*."

"Wow." Draco whispered. "This is awful."

Hermione nodded solemnly. "I know."

"What happens if the potion... doesn't work?" asked Pansy smally.

"I'm trying really hard not to think about it." said Hermione.

---

Though the rest of the day seemed to pass slowly and felt (at least to Hermione) tainted by the article in *The Prophet*, it was eventually the end of classes and the students were let out to go get ready for the Halloween feast. Hermione managed to push the sense of foreboding, sadness and guilt about the article and her potion to the back of her mind as everyone prepared for the evening. She wished Hogwarts did this type of a costumed Halloween feast every year. She could only imagine what kinds of costumes the Weasley twins would have cooked up.

Pansy dressed in her pink Marilyn Monroe evening gown that she'd spent quite a lot of time in the evenings sewing together. She curled her short black hair like Marilyn's and donned long pink gloves and sparkling costume jewelry. Hermione helped her with her makeup and charming Pansy's hair so it would last most of the night.

Hermione put on the flowing, glittering gown that she'd been putting together, followed by shimmering silver shoes. She had to employ the help of Sleazekey's Hair Taming Gel to straighten her hair out so she could put it in an elegant up-do, like the one she'd had at the Yule

Ball in her fourth year. After Pansy helped Hermione apply her makeup, Hermione pinned a small tiara atop her head and the girls were ready.

Surveying herself in the mirror, Hermione thought, *If only Ron could see me now*. She smiled at her reflection.

Although it didn't seem like they'd needed to do much to get ready, it took them the entire time from the early end of classes to when the students were supposed to be arriving in the Hall for the feast to do so. The girls quickly descended the stairs into the Common Room where the others were already waiting for them.

Draco was wearing a pair of dark, tight fitting jeans, a white tank top and a black leather jacket. His hair was greased with black color and styled high on his head in the signature James Dean style. Judging by his stance, he seemed to be quite "in character" already.

Pansy squealed happily and ran over to plant a kiss on Draco's cheek, leaving a bright red lipstick mark behind. Pansy's laughter that followed this moment was high and shrieky - a laugh Hermione had not heard from Pansy since she'd arrived in this new world. She shook herself as the image of "her" Pansy Parkinson flashed through her mind.

Greg was dressed in colored robes that somehow looked too big for him (a curious feat, considering Greg was quite tall and stocky). He had managed to color his hair somewhat blonde, though in truth it was more brown-blond than the "Ludo Bagman blonde" he'd been trying to achieve. While his outfit didn't seem to specifically indicate who he was, his mannerisms - according to the others - were spot on. He didn't act at all like Hermione would have thought someone impersonating Ludo Bagman might, though she had to remind herself she did not know the Ludo in this world. So she took the others' word for it that Greg was hilariously perfect at pretending to be the Minister.

Vinny was going to the feast as a "fairytale vampire", as he called it, since vampires apparently did not look like the one Vinny was portraying. He had bought a set of fake, bloody teeth on their last trip to Hogsmeade and was wearing them now. They oozed what looked like real blood but what Vinny said was actually a very tasty raspberry

syrup. He'd used typical costume makeup to make his face ghostly white with deep, dark circles under his eyes. Far from looking frightening, however, he looked rather comical, especially when he stumbled constantly over his long black cape.

Millicent had chosen to go as her favorite Quidditch player, Regina Corkscrew of the Tutshill Tornadoes. She was dressed in their signature blue robes and had her Cleansweep attached to a wide leather strap so she could carry it across her back like a bow and arrow, leaving her arms free. She'd also used several bottles of hair products and a more than a few charms so make her hair an explosion of spirally black curls, just like Chaser Regina Corkscrew's. Seeing the Tornadoes' logo emblazoned on Millicent's chest once again made Hermione think of Ron, and the time he'd basically told Cho Chang off for wearing a Tornadoes badge.

If all went well, she would be seeing Ron tomorrow morning.

The thought simultaneously cheered and saddened her. Before she thought of Ron any longer, Hermione firmly decided to push all thoughts of him and home out of her mind for now. Tonight, it was about these friends and this feast, and her last night in this world.

The group made their way down to the Hall, joining up with other students in costume along the way. As they came down the great marble staircase leading to the Entrance Hall, Hermione couldn't help smiling widely.

Everywhere she looked, there was someone in costume. There were Halloween decorations of all descriptions hanging in mid air above them and adorning the walls all around. Chatter and laughter could be heard above all other noises as the students filed into the Great Hall for the feast.

"This is so exciting!" said Hermione, gazing around at the others, as the sight around her filled her with high spirits.

"I know." Pansy grinned, then added a little sadly, "I wish Ally was here to see this."

Hermione's heart guiltily sunk a little. She reached over and gave her friend's hand a quick squeeze. "Me too."

She fleetingly thought of the moment not too long ago when Ally had been trying to convince Hermione to stop cutting herself off from everyone.

*"Hermione, if you leave with things the way they are now, you'll always wonder what you could have done differently. You'll always wonder why you didn't do this or say that and make things better. Believe me when I say it, because I have those thoughts often about... things."*

Hermione felt more saddened by this. There were so many things she didn't know about Ally and never would. She wished her friend had had time to write her own 'things I never got to say' letter before she'd gotten sick.

A second later, however, Hermione forcefully left those sad thoughts behind. Ally wouldn't want anything to spoil what was sure to be a wonderful night. Besides, she spotted her prince waiting patiently off to the side of the doors to the Great Hall, and nearly all other thoughts were washed instantly from her mind. Hermione swiftly wove through the throng of wildly attired students filing into the Hall for the feast to reach him.

He smiled and looked her over intensely. She avoided feeling self-conscious by taking a second to do the same to him and his outfit.

Cedric was dressed in dark pants and a royal blue waistcoat trimmed with silver. The buttons shone in the bright candlelight above them and his knee-high black boots looked highly polished. He'd even attached some fake medals to his breast pocket to show his "royal rank". All in all, he looked very handsome, like a prince that had stepped off the pages of the perfect fairytale story – just as Prince Charming ought to look like.

"Good evening, m'lady." He said and bowed low and proper before her.

She giggled then straightened her features as she replied, "And you as well, Prince Cedric."

He grinned widely and offered her his velvet covered arm. "Shall we?"

She grinned back as she took it. "We shall."

## **Chapter 29**

If Hermione had thought the Entrance Hall had been beautiful, it was nothing compared to the sight that greeted her eyes upon entering the Great Hall. It was more magnificent than Hermione had ever seen it and she gasped loudly as a result.

Like the Yule Ball in her fourth year, all the House Tables had been replaced by many smaller round tables. Unlike the Yule Ball, however, which had been decorated festively for Christmas, the Hall was now covered in brilliant Halloween decorations of every description. Several hundred pumpkins of varying sizes and shapes floated high above them, each with a warm flickering candle buried inside. Bats flew up near the ceiling, which displayed the clear, starry sky outside. Golden orange cloth was draped like curtains or banners around the Hall's walls. All the round tables had sparkling black table cloths atop them complimenting the seats of mahogany chairs placed around the tables. In the center of each table was a large glass bowl filled with what looked like water, though it would repeatedly stand up out of the bowl and create different shapes and reflect different colors.

Each person in the Hall was in costume and that perhaps was what made the Hall the most captivating. Everywhere Hermione looked there was a new splash of color. She spotted people dressed as different Quidditch players, wild animals, and mythical creatures. There were people dressed as fictional characters, Muggle or wizard celebrities. She saw people dressed as odd things like food items or household objects. She noticed many clever outfits too: one boy was wearing plain clothes with loud numbers taped randomly across his body, while a sign across his chest boldly read, "A friend you can count on".

Hermione and Cedric took a seat at an empty table and were shortly joined by Ewan (as Sirius Black) and a girl named Hayley (who was going as Ewan's screaming fan girl), and Pansy and Draco. Hermione giggled when Ewan sat down, as he was sporting a wig of shaggy black hair that was actually very similar to Sirius' real mop of hair. He had on a black t-shirt with a bright version of the Weird Sisters' logo displayed on it, a shining black vest with silver zippers, tall black combat boots, and long fitted black jeans. The bit that was making



Hermione and then the others laugh, however, aside from the black nail polish (which Pansy, the “Sirius expert”, insisted Sirius only wore during concerts) and the dog tags around Ewan’s neck (which Hermione found highly amusing because she knew of Sirius’ Animagus form), was the way Ewan had borrowed Hayley’s black eye-liner to draw dark stubble and a small moustache across his face and to darken his eyebrows. The fact that he had used the eye-liner at all, let alone to color his eyebrows, was the source of much amusement and non-stop jokes all the way until the feast appeared on their tables.

“How else was I supposed to achieve his look!” Ewan shouted good-naturedly for the hundredth time.

The food was, of course, as magnificent as everything else so far. Though the round tables were relatively small, they still managed to hold a spectacular array of food. Besides that, the tables were close enough together that food could easily be passed between tables if need be, though far enough away so it was not too crowded to walk between. Hermione sampled as much of the superb food as possible, positive it had never before been this good at Hogwarts, though she was careful to leave room for dessert.

After dessert – which was more amazing than Hermione could have guessed could be served at Hogwarts – came the Halloween dance. The food disappeared from the tables, followed by all the plates and cutlery. Everyone began standing up from their tables and moving to one side of the Hall so that the tables could be pushed out of the way to create a dance floor.

The music was provided by a very short man with puffy black and green hair named Kleon (Hermione soon learned he was the wizard equivalent of a Muggle DJ). Kleon stood on a stool behind some strange looking boxes and equipment and tapped his wand at a panel the students could not see. When the music began, it seemed to come from everywhere and was neither too loud or too quiet. Kleon smiled toothily and danced as best as he could atop his stool.

Hermione danced primarily with Cedric, though on most of the faster songs, she danced in a group with her friends. People milled and

danced all across the floor including – Hermione received the shock of her life to see – Professors Snape, Sprout, Sinistra, Flitwick, Vector, Grubbly-Planks and Dumbledore. McGonagall remained at the Head Table, glowering at everyone and snapping at anyone who came too close.

Kleon played a few slow songs here and there, including an old ballad by a Muggle named Louis Armstrong called “Moon River”, which Hermione found to be a soothing, dreamy sort of song. On these slower songs, Hermione danced in Cedric’s arms and prayed for time to crawl. She refused to know what time it was, for it would only remind her how little time she had left.

“You alright?” asked Cedric quietly in her ear during one slow song.

Hermione sighed sadly. “At the moment.” She answered honestly.

He kissed the top of her head. “Me too.”

Looking out at the other couples on the floor, their faces slightly in shadow because of the dimmed candles, the music tinkling along a sweet melody, Hermione smiled.

*This is perfect. She thought. Please just freeze this moment... etch it into my memory forever...*

Just a few moments later, the song ended and Hermione reluctantly pulled away from Cedric. She was just opening her mouth to say something to him when Kleon spoke into his wand and his voice was magnified several times, filling the Hall. He said,

“Alrighty everybody, it’s close to midnight and for this next song, I want to see you *all* up and dancing!” He looked over to McGonagall who looked murderous and didn’t move a muscle. The next song began and it was a high energy, peppy song, but Hermione wasn’t listening.

“It’s *what?!*” she said panickedly.

“Almost midnight.” Draco answered easily then snapped his attention worriedly back to Hermione. “Oh no, it’s almost *midnight.*”

Hermione's throat constricted and her heart began to race. "I... I've got to go." She said haltingly. Suddenly, she didn't know what to do. Her friends all looked anxious or sad and she didn't want to leave the glorious feast and dance. At the same time, part of her was pulling for her to hurry or she could lose Harry and Ron forever. Deep down, no matter how much she loved this world or any particular part of it, she knew she couldn't stay, knew she couldn't *bear* to stay – not forever.

She turned to Cedric. "I'll come with you." He said quickly.

"Cedric, you can't – "

"As far as I can." He finished firmly.

She didn't know what to say, so she faced her friends again. Fortunately they at least had an idea of what to do next. They hastily moved forward and hugged her one by one.

"We'll miss you." Said Draco.

"You'll have your old Hermione back after all this, though." Hermione said shakily.

"But we'll still miss *you*." Smiled Vinny.

"You'd better hurry." Greg nodded his head at the clock. There were less than ten minutes left until midnight.

Pansy was the last to embrace Hermione and the most tearful.

"Say 'bye to Ally for me." Hermione whispered, holding back her own tears abruptly threatening to spill out.

Pansy nodded and squeaked emotionally, "Bye then."

Cedric gave Hermione's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "You're running out of time." He said quietly.

Hermione blinked hard. "I know." She mumbled. Then, in true Cinderella fashion, she turned and tore from the Hall, minutes before midnight, Prince Charming close behind.

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They dashed through the castle until they reached the room where Hermione had been making her potion. She clutched the stitch in her side as her hair fell out of her up-do in frayed strands and chunks.

Sweat poured down Cedric's face and he was looking extremely sickly again; the energy potion from Madame Pomfrey he'd taken earlier had worn off during the run.

"This is it." panted Hermione, throwing open the door. Butterflies seemed to be swarming madly inside her stomach as she looked upon the familiar contents of the room. The cauldron on the floor bubbled excitedly and was a pleasing shade of blue-green, much like the ocean. It smelled like the ocean too, as a very salty, fresh smell reached them.

Hermione turned to Cedric. Again, she felt stuck for words as mixed emotions battled through her. "Ced, I... I wouldn't have traded a second of our time together... for anything."

He nodded. "Me... neither." He sucked in his breath and seemed to fighting off a severe wave of nausea. His pale complexion now had a nasty green tinge to it. He staggered sideways.

Hermione caught his arm and leaned him against the wall so he wouldn't fall. *This is my fault. She thought. My stupid wish is wearing off and this is what's happening to people who are not supposed to be alive.* Not for the first time, she hated her wish. Yet at the same time, she truly meant what she'd said to Cedric: she wouldn't have traded their time together for anything.

"Are you alright?" she asked, knowing he wasn't going to be if she lingered any longer.

"Go." He whispered. He too, knew everything would only get worse if Hermione didn't get to her potion. There was only about one or two minutes left before midnight struck, and the potion would no longer do its job. "Hermione, you've got to go."

"I don't want to leave you like this..."

"You're going to have to." Cedric forced a weak smile and then slid down the wall so he could sit on the floor. "I'll be alright."

Tears stung her eyes again and she blinked hard to force them away.

"Your world is waiting for you to come back to it." He was starkly pale and seemed to be weakening by the second, which made Hermione want to simultaneously stay and leave even more.

She glanced back at the potion which was starting to sputter like a dying vehicle. She was almost out of time.

Cedric coughed, fought away another wave of nausea and allowed his eyelids to close. Hermione thought of Ally and the article in the *Prophet*, and all the people lying in Mango's because of her. She thought of Sirius and –

"Wait." She said and hurried into the room. Sitting near the cauldron was a small stack of letters, neatly bound together. Her "things I never got to say" letters. She snatched them up and ran to Cedric. "Cedric, you have to do something for me." She did her best to keep her voice steady as she spoke. "Do you hear me?"

He forced his eyes open, started to nod then whispered, "Yeah."

She placed the bundle of letters in his lap and found her vision suddenly blurred by tears. "Give these to Pansy. She'll figure out what to do with them. Alright?"

"Yeah." Cedric answered softly.

Hermione glanced back at the cauldron. The potion was bubbling even less now and the steam was beginning to disappear. She looked up at a clock in the hallway. She had seconds before the potion would not work...

"I'll miss you." Said Hermione as the tears broke free and slid down her flushed cheeks.

Barely audible, Cedric murmured, "...love you." He kept his eyes trained on hers.

Hermione stared one last time into those Pensieve-deep gray eyes, gently kissed those lips one last time and pulled away. "I love you too, Cedric Diggory."

Then, as she'd been planning for so long, Hermione crouched beside the cauldron with a large glass in her hand. She scooped up a near full glass of the potion, shut her eyes tight against more tears and put the glass to her trembling lips.

She drank the entire contents of the glass in one breath.

## **Chapter 30**

She lowered the glass and waited tensely with her eyes shut for something incredible to happen.

A moment passed. Nothing happened.

She held her eyes shut tighter and every muscle in her body was rigid with expectation.

A few more moments passed. Still, nothing happened.

There were no whooshing noises, no bright lights, no ceiling opening up to the sky and whisking her away to her proper reality... nothing out of the ordinary. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting to happen, but she had been expecting *something* to happen.

Hermione cracked open one eye, slowly followed by the other. Not a single thing seemed different from when she'd shut them. Still, she waited, rooted to the spot, not moving for fear something would go wrong if she did. She dropped her gaze to the cauldron contents to see that it had gone completely black and solid as a rock. She briefly wondered how she was going to get that out of the cauldron.

She glanced around the room with mounting despair and panic. It had to have worked... it *had* to have...

Yet nothing was different. Nothing happened.

Hermione's eyes became blurred and the despair and panic rose inside her worse than before. She had failed to drink the potion in time and fix things, and now more people were going to end up sick. Cedric was going to go to join Ally in St. Mango's, unconscious, ill and somewhere between life and death. Hermione's worlds were going to get thrown into a blender and merge horribly.

She couldn't do anything else but cry.

Somehow, eventually, she'd stumbled her way back to Gryffindor Tower. Cedric was not outside the potion room like she had expected him to be, as he had seemed in no condition to move when she'd

gone in. She picked up a shining button that must have fallen off his costume and clutched it tight in her fist.

Hermione met no one along the way and it wasn't until she was crawling fully costumed into her bed that she wondered how much time had passed since she and Cedric had run from the ball. The hangings on all the beds in the dorm were shut and the other girls sounded like they were sleeping deeply. Besides that, the embers in the Common Room fire were nearly out.

Hermione slowly drew her own bed hangings closed. Though she did her best to push thoughts of what kind of a terrible, mixed up world she'd be waking up to away, it was to no avail.

She cried herself to sleep.

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When she woke, for the briefest of moments, she thought that it was so nice to sleep in a little on a Saturday. Then a rush of memories as rude as a cold bucket of water to face bombarded her and she immediately felt miserable. She pulled the covers over her head and groaned.

*Oh please, please let it all have been a bad dream. Let me go back to sleep and wake up where everything is right...* she pleaded silently.

Hermione stayed in bed for a little while longer, wishing everything would just go away, before she finally managed to haul herself out to face what was sure to be a very, very difficult day. With a deep, heavy sigh, she began brushing her teeth.

She stopped mid-brush and looked down at herself and what she was wearing. Funny, she didn't remember changing out of her costume and into her pajamas. She obviously must have, however, as she hadn't woken up as Cinderella. Hermione shook her head sadly. She was in a right state last night; she wasn't surprised she didn't remember changing. With a shrug and another sad sigh, she finished her morning routine.

Just before Hermione left the dorm, she noticed that the covers on Ally's bed were rumpled as if they had been slept in very recently.



That was a bit odd, as Ally hadn't slept in her bed for a good week or more. Then again, Hermione didn't recall that anyone had made it since Ally had left.

Very slowly, Hermione descended the staircase down to the Common Room. Her eyes were already stinging with fresh tears at having to face her friends and tell them that the potion had not worked after all. She would have to explain that they were all going to become crosses between the people from Hermione's old world and this new one. She would have to pretend to be brave, like she was all up for quickly creating a new potion, no problem. She would have to face the fact that she'd wrecked everything worse than she could have imagined.

She was especially worried about having to face Cedric at breakfast. *That is*, thought Hermione glumly. *If he hasn't already been rushed off to St. Mango's.*

Just before she entered the Common Room, she took a deep steadying breath. She had to face it. She had to have courage. She could do this. It would turn out alright eventually. She would just have to suffer a nightmare before things could be normal...

She could hear the familiar murmur of conversation and it somehow soothed her a tiny bit. She rounded the corner and stepped into the Common Room.

Hermione froze.

"There you are! Look, we're really sorry, Hermione."

"Yeah, we never should have yelled like we did – "

"We were way out of line. I think there was something in the locker room water – ah, anyways, what I mean is – "

"We were awful, Hermione, and we're so sorry – "

The tears spilled onto her cheeks.

"Oh, Hermione don't cry – "

“We didn’t know we’d hurt you so bad until you yelled back and we – “

Before they could say another word, Hermione threw her arms around Harry and Ron and hugged them as tight as she could, afraid they weren’t real. Afraid she was about to wake up to face the misery of the potion that had not worked.

“You’re real!” she breathed.

“Um...”

“I missed you so much.” She cried.

“Right...”

They patted her awkwardly on the back until she pulled away with red and wet cheeks.

Looking from Ron’s freckled face to Harry’s bespectacled one, Hermione wasn’t sure if she could possibly feel more happy and relieved in that moment. The potion *had* worked – just during the night – and her wish had indeed been finally, blissfully reversed. Everything was back to normal.

Harry opened his mouth to say something but Hermione beat him to it.

“What are you sorry about?” she asked.

They looked at her blankly.

“You said you didn’t know you hurt me so bad and that you’re sorry you yelled.” Hermione moved her gaze from one to the other questioningly. “What are you talking about?”

Harry and Ron exchanged confused and wary glances with each other, then turned back to Hermione.

“Last night. After practice.” Harry explained carefully. “When we yelled.”

Hermione scrunched her eyebrows together.

Ron raised one of his own eyebrows. "You were, er, rather angry, Hermione. How could you forget?"

Hermione racked her brain. It must be the other Hermione they were talking about. They must have traded places after all. She had been transported to a world where her Slytherins were Gryffindors and probably received quite the shock, seeing as how she had done nothing to cause such an upheaval. Hermione felt bad for the other girl and didn't know what to say to Ron and Harry to explain the behavior of the other Hermione that had likely been, well, the opposite of the Hermione they knew.

But then she remembered: the fight that she had had with Harry and Ron that had caused her rash wish to come about in the first place. She recalled Dumbledore's words about the girl who'd made a wish before Hermione:

*"...everything was back to the way it had been when she made the wish..."*

"Oh. Right." She said, then smiled widely. She was too happy to see them – the *real* them! – that she could care less about the fight. "I'm really sorry too – more than you know. I didn't mean what I said. Believe me when I say, I'm glad things aren't different."

She felt a tiny pang of guilt at these words, because she *did* enjoy most of her time in the other world, where things were totally different. She would miss it, for sure, but she knew now that she wouldn't trade the one she already had for anything else.

The two boys cracked wide grins.

"So you're not mad?" asked Ron.

"After I tell you two what happened to me, I think you'll understand why."

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The tale of the wish and the parallel universe took quite some time to tell. At first, the boys were understandably extremely skeptical and repeatedly told her she must have dreamt it all. When she produced

the coin and showed them a few (non-incriminating nor embarrassing) entries from her journal, however, they began to believe she was telling the truth.

Hermione was careful to leave out the part about her fight with Cedric and make it sound like he'd merely been apart of her circle of friends, rather than someone much more. Someday she supposed she would tell them the full truth, but she desperately didn't want Ron to get flaming jealous as she knew he would (he always did over Viktor Krum, and there was absolutely no romance there!). Harry loved the bit about what Snape and Filch had been like, while Ron greatly enjoyed the part about what Hermione had found out about his brothers.

When she got to the part about Sirius being in a rock band, she proceeded with great caution, as Harry was still hurting pretty badly after Sirius' death not too many months ago. Though his face became a little more closed and sad, he seemed to like hearing about Sirius in the band and being happy and alive. At the same time, it was quite obvious hearing it made him miss Sirius even more.

"Which reminds me, Harry." Hermione dug in her bag. "Sirius sent me some letters to give to people when I got back. It took me a while to figure out how to get them here without them possibly changing or disappearing, but I finally got it. My journal kept all my old entries from before; they weren't changed or gone. So I put the letters in there so hopefully when I drank the potion, they'd transfer with me."

Harry stared at Hermione with a sort of hopeful and scared look on his face, as though he was hoping with all his might it had worked, was trying desperately not to hope at all, and didn't think he'd be able to read the letter if he got it anyway.

"Did it... work?" he asked quietly.

Hermione smiled softly. "Yeah, it did." She produced a letter with Harry's name on it in Sirius' handwriting from her bag.

Harry gingerly took the letter, open-mouthed, and handled it like it might disappear if he turned it the wrong way or blinked too slowly. "It's real?" he breathed.

Hermione nodded.

Harry held the letter as though it were extremely fragile glass that could break at any second and stared at his name on the envelope.

Hermione grabbed Ron's hand, who was also regarding Harry's letter in awe and pulled him out of his chair. "We'll be outside, Harry." She said and hauled Ron out of the portrait hole.

It wasn't until she and Ron were walking across the brown grass of the Hogwarts grounds that Hermione realized she was still holding Ron's hand. She'd been so concerned with giving Harry his privacy and getting outside like she'd told him that she truly hadn't given a thought to it. She slowed her brisk pace, and blushing furiously, made a move to hurriedly let go. She was quite startled when he squeezed her hand to prevent her pulling away action.

"Hermione..." he said uncomfortably and swallowed. "Did... anything else happen? You know, with your wish?"

Hermione almost missed his question as she was so focused on the fact that Ron was still holding her hand. She was acutely aware that she had held it all this time and somehow not noticed it until this moment. "L-like what?"

Ron's ears reddened. "You just seem... different, somehow. And that's why I thought maybe... well, that's why I believe your story, more than anything. You're not quite the same person you were... yesterday, I guess."

Hermione had no idea where he was going with this and chose not to reply. *His hand was still on hers...*

"I just mean..." he cleared his throat, obviously realizing he wasn't explaining himself very well at all. He stopped walking so he could turn and look her in the eye. He seemed to lose his nerve for whatever he was going to say, however, as he looked away quickly and started walking again.

Trying to fight the way her arm was tingling and her heart was racing – his hand! – Hermione teased, "What, you don't like me anymore?"

Ron stopped and faced her again. "I like you very much, Hermione." He said seriously and then went practically scarlet, dropping his gaze to his feet. He attempted to adopt a similar teasing tone to the one Hermione had used, but the shake in his voice gave away that what he said before had been the truth. "For an insufferable know-it-all girl, of course." He forced a wobbly smile but didn't seem to be able to meet her eyes again.

Abruptly, Hermione remembered Cedric's words to her. It seemed like years ago that he had spoken them:

*"...I can read between the lines here. Maybe you don't see it because you're a girl or one of his best friends or whatever. Besides that, I feel like I just know. I really believe that he likes you more than a friend. In fact, I would go as far as to say I believe Ron Weasley loves you..."*

Ron added in a mumble he thought Hermione didn't hear, "Always have."

"Really?" Hermione whispered a moment later when she found she was able to breathe again.

Ron looked up, scared because she had heard and understood his mumble. He nodded slowly.

Hermione smiled. "Me too."

Ron opened his mouth in surprise then relaxed and grinned widely.

In that moment, Hermione understood. Ron really did like her much more than just a friend like Cedric had said. Hermione had liked Ron "that way" for so long that him standing there, saying he liked her too, seemed like a perfect dream. And she knew, that even if she and Ron went on to live happily ever after, she'd always have a special spot in her heart for the unexpected love she'd shared with Cedric Diggory for those two strange and special months.

## **Epilogue**

*Dear Pansy,*

*Firstly, if you're reading this, then the potion worked. I'm back in my world and "your" Hermione has been restored to you. Since we didn't get time for a proper goodbye, this is my goodbye letter to you.*

*You are one cool girl, Pansy. You made me feel better when I was down, you always had a comforting word, sweet smile or a bucket of patience when it was needed most. You and Ally share these qualities – and I wouldn't have wished have wished for better friends than you two.*

*I'm going to miss having some real girl friends to talk to and hang out with, believe me! Take care. I'll never forget you and even though you'll have "your" Hermione back, I hope you never forget me.*

*Hermione Granger*

*P.S I gave you the letters for everyone else, because I trust you'll be able to get them to everyone.*

*P.P.S. You and Draco make a great couple, by the way.*

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Cedric rolled over in his bed, feeling oddly queasy and confused. His mind felt fuzzy like he'd just recovered from a nasty bout of the flu, but for some reason, he couldn't remember being sick. Oddly, he couldn't seem to remember much of anything. His eyes glanced searchingly around the dorm room he was in until they landed on his nightstand, where a letter with his name on it was propped up against his lamp.

The writing was strangely familiar yet he couldn't place it. He picked up the letter and turned it around in his hands before slowly opening it. As he read the letter, memories as if from another life abruptly flashed through him.

*Dear Cedric,*

*I have so many things I'll never get to say to you, Cedric, but not really much time, ink or parchment to say them in (without turning this letter into a book, haha).*

*Thank you for being so kind, so understanding, open, sweet, and all around wonderful. You were the perfect guy, Cedric and which ever girl you end up with will be a very, very lucky girl indeed. Even though we had some tough times together, I don't regret a second of it.*

*I mean it with all my heart when I say I will never, ever forget you. You'll always have a spot in my heart. I'm really going to miss your shining smile and dashing charm! But seriously, Cedric, I really will.*

*Goodbye, Cedric.*

*Love Always,*

*Hermione*

Cedric re-read the letter several times, emotion clogging his throat. Then he couldn't help but smile.

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"Alright, when you've finished snogging or whatever you've been doing, do you fancy getting some lunch?" Harry said as soon as he'd reached the large tree that Ron and Hermione were leaning against.

They both went red and hastily stood up.

"We weren't – " Hermione started.

"We were just – " Ron began.

Harry put a hand up to quiet them both. "Save it. It's about time you two got together. You can tell me about it over lunch.

Ron and Hermione exchanged embarrassed glances before turning back to Harry. Harry's eyes were red and puffy as though he'd cried a little very recently, though Ron and Hermione pretended not to notice. The trio walked to the main entrance of Hogwarts, with the September sun beating down on their backs.



Upon entering the Entrance Hall, Hermione spotted Professor Dumbledore. She told Ron and Harry to go on ahead and she'd catch up, before hurrying herself over to talk to Dumbledore.

"Ah, Miss Granger." Dumbledore's wrinkled features cracked into a wide grin. "Good job. I knew you could do it."

"Thank you sir." Replied Hermione. Though she gave no indication of how close of a call the whole coming-back process had been, Dumbledore already seemed to know. Hermione added, "Professor, I just had two questions."

"Just two? Very well then, go ahead."

"Whatever happened to Ally Minstrel? I don't know who she is – well, was. She was in Gryffindor in that other world, so that must mean that she's a Slytherin in this one, but I've never seen her with Pansy or Draco before. And then she... well, she got so sick..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. That occurred, because had she grown up to attend Hogwarts, it's likely she would've been sorted into the Slytherin house."

"Wait, '*had* she grown up'?"

Dumbledore nodded again, this time more solemnly. "The Minstrels were one of those families who agreed with Voldemort's early ideas about pureblood wizards. They voiced support for him until things got a little too dark and dirty for their liking. They tried to back out of it all and side with the Ministry and the Order instead, seeing the error in their ways, but naturally Voldemort wanted only fiercely loyal followers and not people who changed sides to avoid getting their hands dirty. Besides that, he saw them as traitors after they pulled their support."

Hermione touched a hand to her chest and said quietly, guessing the next part of the story, "They were killed?"

"Yes." Dumbledore answered sadly. "Ally was one of the first people to get sick in the wish world, because in this one, she died very young."

She was just a baby when her family was wiped out by Voldemort and the Death Eaters.”

Hermione covered her mouth in horror. *Poor Ally... she never even had a chance at life...*

Dumbledore respectfully let Hermione digest this piece of disturbing information before politely prodding, “You said you had two questions for me?”

Hermione forced herself to recover from the shock about Ally’s past. There was nothing she could have done about it anyways. She swallowed and went on a little shakily. “Yes. I wanted to know who the other girl who made the wish was.”

Dumbledore clasped his hands in front of him, looking thoughtful and vaguely amused. After a moment, he said, “If you promise you will not reveal the identity of the girl to anyone, unfortunately including Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, and *especially* not the girl – who is now, in fact, a woman.”

“Of course not, sir.” Replied Hermione at once, meaning it wholeheartedly. “I promise.”

Dumbledore regarded Hermione searchingly for a moment longer before, seemingly satisfied she would indeed keep that piece of information forever to herself, he spoke again. “Very well.” He said. “The other girl was...”

Hermione’s mind raced with possibilities. If she was that strictly forbidden to tell, it must be someone she knew... another teacher perhaps? A classmate? No, he’d said woman... who could it be...

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled amusedly and he couldn’t help smiling as he said, “Molly Weasley.”

Hermione’s mouth inadvertently fell open. She’d thought of several different people and had not come close to that conclusion. She hastily closed her mouth before asking, “When?”

“Her fourth year, I believe it was.” He answered.

Hermione could barely believe it. She too, it seemed, couldn't help smiling. "Thank you very much, sir."

"You're quite welcome." Dumbledore grinned. Then he added ever so slightly more seriously, but still smiling, "I would assume you have likely learned a valuable lesson from your experience, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded. "And a lot more."

Instead of hurrying to the Great Hall where Ron and Harry were likely saving her seats and wondering what was taking so long, Hermione ran towards the main doors to go back outside.

"Miss Granger, are you not having lunch this fine morning?" Dumbledore called after her.

"In a minute, Professor, I've just remembered something real important I have to do." Hermione called back and made her way out onto the grounds.

Dumbledore whistled a merry tune and moved to get lunch himself, glad that rather strange reverse world ordeal was quite over with.

Hermione reached the edge of the lake and pulled the Wishing Coin from the deep recesses of her pockets. In the distance, she could see the Giant Squid lazily swimming near the surface of the water. She looked down at the coin, which read, just as it had on the day she'd found it,

*"To make a wish, hold coin in the palm of hand or in pocket. Simply start a sentence with 'I wish...' and your wish will be granted!"*

*Take Extreme CAUTION: Most wishes are IRREVERSIBLE!"*

Memories of her two months in the wish world flitted and twirled through her mind as she stood there staring at the shining gold surface of the coin, about the size of a Galleon. She smiled smally.

Then she wound up her arm and threw the coin as far out onto the lake as she possibly could. She felt oddly relieved and satisfied when

she saw a small splash and heard a 'plunk' where the coin hit the water.

Her smile grew. With the glorious feeling that all was as it should be, and wonderful even so, Hermione Granger walked once again across the grass to Hogwarts where her two best friends in the entire world, Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, were waiting to enjoy lunch with her.

**(...the end)**

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**A/n:** Wow. I have finally finished that story. I did like it, for sure, but it took a lot out of me. Thank you to each and every single reviewer from the first time chapter one was put up all the way to now, and including everyone who will be reviewing any time after this. Thank you for taking the time to leave me any form of feedback (even it was just "yay" or "nay"! lol). To a very special group of reviewers who I reviewed every chapter (or close to every chapter): thank you guys and girls above all. To keep sticking with me through my obscenely long update times really makes me so appreciative! Two last things: before you ask, no, currently, there is no sequel planned. Maybe someday when my life is not so insane (but it has to be a real good plot idea). And secondly, look for the companion to this story, "Letters" which are Sirius' 'Things I Never Got to Say' letters, coming as soon as I can write it. :) Oh and one more thing (for real this time), if there are any questions about anything in the story, go ahead and ask them, for I no longer have to attempt to be cryptic and mysterious about answering questions. :P Thank you all again, so much. Red Bess Rackham, over and out.